RANCH ROMANCES

△ AUGUST 35c
A THRILLING PUBLICATION

An epic novel of powder-smoke and forbidden love

DIE BY THE GUN

BY ELMER KELTON

WIN MONEY

(See prize coupon)

WOLF AT HIS HEELS

BY A. E. SCHRAFF

A scorching novelet

DRY SUMMER

BY GIFF CHESHIRE

TO PEOPLE WHO WANT TO WRITE FOR PROFIT BUT CAN'T GET STARTED

"Thank you NIA" says Mrs. Bessie H. Heck

"Thanks to NIA I am enjoying many rewards. In addition to **Millie,** my book for children (World Pub. Co.), I have published dozens of short stories and features in magazines and newspapers and write up 1 to 8 pieces for the trade press every week."—Mrs. Bessie H. Heck, 3321 E. 4th St., Tulsa 12, Okla.

"Thank you NIA" says Wayne C. Ulsh

"I know you'll be happy to hear of my latest lucky break. Thanks to NIA I just landed this good-paying job as editorial assistant for the New York State Electric & Gas Co. I'm writing and editing the company newspaper, turning out press releases and working on magazines, special brochures, and other writing projects. It's thrilling! I also have a novel half finished and look forward hopefully to its publication. None of these things could have happened without NIA training."—Wayne C. Ulsh, 412 Clubhouse Rd., Apt. 5, Binghamton, N.Y.

"Thank you NIA" says Mrs. Ruth E. Renkel

"Although my work has appeared in 50 magazines—a great many of them nationals—I still keep my NIA textbook handy as a reference. Everything I have learned since I finished the course only emphasizes what good training I received with NIA. I am convinced that the Newspaper Institute of America is the one school that gives a person his money's worth."—Mrs. Ruth E. Renkel, P.O. Box 1034, Elyria, Ohio

"Thank you NIA" says Mrs. Florence Severson

"How fortunate for me that I found NIA! Retirement was approaching and I was not yet ready to start knitting. When I learned about NIA it was like a ray of sunshine . . . a sale right off. My first NIA optional assignment "A Land of Widows" was bought by **TRUE WEST** magazine. I how have three more stories in circulation—and knitting seems a long way off!"—Mrs. Florence Severson, 408 Blakely Street, Stillwater, Oklahoma

So many people with the "germ" of writing in them never get started. Some simply suffer from inertia; others question their own ability to become professional writers. Often they hold back because of a mistaken idea that all published writers are gifted with special talents.

Yet the surprising fact is that the great bulk of work that finds its way daily into print is turned out by so-called "unknowns." Fiction, news stories, features, copy, TV and radio scripts and countless articles covering every kind of human activity are written by men and women just like yourself. Such material is in constant demand. Every week countless checks for $10, $25, $50, $100 and much more go out to writers, thousands of them NIA trained.

If you have an urge to write for publication—to use writing as a stimulating and profitable outlet for your creative energies—here's your chance to put aside all guesswork, all doubts and get an expert analysis of your natural writing ability and your prospects for success... without cost or obligation!

NOW A CHANCE TO TEST YOURSELF . . . FREE

The Writers Institute Division of NIA offers a FREE Writing Aptitude Test. Its object is to discover more men and women who can realize their writing ambitions and add to their income at the same time by writing stories, articles, books, publicity, advertising copy, etc. You'll enjoy this fascinating test. Those who pass, qualify for the famous NIA Writers' Training at home. Thousands of men and women like yourself who have taken the test have been amazed how often the *desire* to write and the latent *ability* to write go hand in hand... how quickly professional NIA training can develop a "hidden" aptitude into a successful writing style.

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You gain the "professional" touch that gets your material accepted by editors. Above all, you see constant progress as your faults are corrected and your writing ability grows. Under the expert, personal supervision of the NIA experienced editors, many students embark on full-time professional writing careers. Others begin to sell stories and articles easily written in their spare time, almost from the start. Often they enjoy a continuous increase in these extra earnings throughout their training.

Have You Natural Writing Ability?

Our FREE Writing Aptitude Test will analyze your powers of observation, your imagination and dramatic instinct. You'll enjoy taking this test. There is no cost or obligation. No salesman will call. Simply mail the coupon below today. Writers Institute Division of Newspaper Institute of America, Two Park Avenue, New York 10016. N.Y.

Send me without cost or obligation your Writing Aptitude Test and complete information about writing for profit. All correspondence confidential. No salesman. (Accredited Member of Nat'l Home Study Council, Rec. by U.S. Dept. of Ed.; Lic. by N.Y. State Dept. of Ed.; App'd for U.S. Rehab. Training.)

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☐ Features ☐ Poetry ☐ TV ☐ Radio
☐ Advertising ☐ Articles ☐ Drama
☐ Short stories ☐ Fiction Books ☐ Non-fiction

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94-L-787

$70,000.00 IN CASH PRIZES!

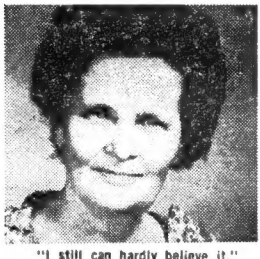
"Your $1,200.00 check arrived this morning by Special Delivery. Thanks ever so much for your telephone call and prompt payment. It still doesn't seem possible. It's been a great thrill."

That's the way Emory Mead of Albany, N. Y., just one of our many big winners, reacted to receiving his cash prize. Dozens of men and women of all ages have cashed in as members of our exciting PUZZLE LOVERS CLUB.

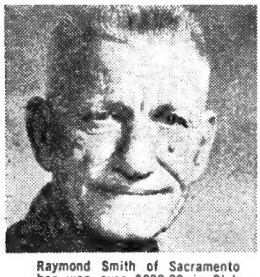
Our Club winners got their cash awards for solving puzzles in their leisure time. Our Club also has awarded huge prizes for many other kinds of contests.

We've awarded cash in hundred-and-thousand-dollar units to retirees, sewing women, farmers, salesmen, war veterans, office workers, clerks, secretaries — people who never before dreamed of having the kind of money that movie stars make.

This announcement is an invitation to you, as a reader of this publication, to find out for yourself if you have the talent to win up to $70,000.00 in cash. If you are over 18 and like to play word games of any kind, the information below may lead you to thousands of dollars in extra cash that you may use as you wish.



"I still can hardly believe it," Mrs. H. C. Despain of Houston, Tex., wrote to us after receiving $1,000.00 in cash as one month's winnings. She is a seamstress who works for a living.



Raymond Smith of Sacramento has won over $900.00 in Club competitions. A retiree, Mr. Smith's first win was only $25.00. Then, as he practiced solving our puzzles, he won much more.

"I was amazed to learn I won $500.00," said Mrs. Florence Humphrey of Cincinnati. "The prize money came at a dandy time as I've had some debts to pay off. Thank you."

WIN CASH MAIL NOW

YOU Can WIN Each Month!

Members of our Club win cash prizes at home, just by solving puzzles and entering Club contests. They turn an educational and enjoyable hobby into pure profit. **You can too!**

Your chief advantage in contests sponsored by our PUZZLE LOVERS CLUB is that you have only limited competition. Only members of the Club may compete and win.

In 1963 we offered our members $35,000.00. We actually paid out more cash than we said we would—$35,511.25, to be exact. In 1964, we again offered $35,000.00. Again, we paid out more than we promised—$40,778.11. And now we're offering our members $70,000.00 in cash prizes. Most contest groups offer about $4,500 or $5,000 a year. **Our Club gives you the opportunity to win double that every month!**

As a member of our Club you will be eligible to enter every cash prize contest we sponsor and you'll get at least four new contests each month. You'll have three weeks to solve each set of contests. One week after the deadline, you'll receive a new copy of our **Puzzle Lovers Newspaper** with names and addresses of all winners, correct solutions, and your new puzzle contests. When YOU win, you receive your prize within two weeks.

IT COSTS YOU NOTHING TO TRY OUR CONTESTS AND SEE IF YOU HAVE THE TALENT TO WIN

The coupon below will bring you, absolutely FREE, a sample copy of our **Puzzle Lovers Newspaper**, the only newspaper in the world exclusively devoted to contests (and it's published for members only). When your free copy of our newspaper arrives, sit down in a quiet place and read about our winners, our prizes, our contests. Try our stimulating word games to see if you can do them. You are under no obligation to enter our contests. If you do decide to go after our cash, there are no boxtops, no jingles to complete, nothing to buy.

Clip the coupon now and please be sure to print your name and address clearly. Then read about $1,000.00 winners like Mrs. Belle Smith of Yakima, Wash. Discover how hundreds of other members cashed in just by doing our puzzles in their spare time. Find out all about this exciting and profitable hobby now. You may receive your first big prize in a few weeks.

AFFIX THIS COUPON TO POSTCARD FOR FAST HANDLING OR MAIL IN ENVELOPE.

PUZZLE LOVERS CLUB Box 2, Prince Street Station, New York City 10012

Gentlemen,

Send me a free copy of your newspaper plus all details on your cash prize contests. I am under absolutely no obligation to pay anything. If I join the Club I may compete for all prizes and spend the cash I win any way I want.

Name_____

Address_____

City_____

State_____ Zip_____

13-110

ENJOY YOURSELF IN YOUR OWN HOME AND WIN EXTRA CASH!

43rd Year of Publication

Editor: Jim Hendryx, Jr.

RANCH ROMANCES

Vol. 219 No. 3
AUGUST, 1967

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EDITOR'S NOTE: For 43 years Our Air Mail has been linking the readers of Ranch Romances. You may write directly to anyone whose letter is published, if you uphold the wholesome spirit of Ranch Romances.

Our Air Mail is intended for those who really want correspondents. Be sure to sign your own name. Address letters for publication to Our Air Mail, Ranch Romances, 355 Lexington Ave., New York 17, N. Y.

Loneliest Place

Dear Editor:

Greetings from the loneliest place in the world — Cimarron, Kansas. I live in four walls, eat at a cafe and work for an insurance company. I'm a 22-year-old female, stand 5'5" tall and weigh 120 pounds. Have brown eyes and dark blonde hair. I'm a Missourian by heart, but nearly 3 years ago I came to western Kansas, so I guess that makes me a Kansan. My interests are reading, listening to Country & Western music (also popular), going to jalopy races and many others. I dare any of you to write and tell me about yourself and send a picture — especially you of the male gender around 25!

CHARLENE DUNN

Box 71
Cimarron, Kansas 67835

Pilot Pal

Dear Editor:

I am 31 years old, 6' tall and weigh 189 pounds. I have dark brown hair and blue eyes. I like all sports, photography and traveling. I am a pilot and like to spend as much time as possible flying. Would like to hear from gals everywhere, and if they care to enclose a snapshot, I will do the same.

LYLE SIBBALD

22242 Dewdney Trunk Road
Haney, B.C., Canada

Everything & Anything

Dear Editor:

I'm a 26-year-old single gal, 5'7" tall and weigh 137. Have brown eyes and black hair. Have many interests, but my first love is the great outdoors — fishing, hiking, boating. Also like to ride cycles and fly. Like rodeos, car races, etc. I take an interest in everything and will try anything once. I like all music, but my favorite is Country-Western. Would love to hear from people all over the U.S.A. and will send photo if requested and answer all who write.

ROBERTA PERKINS

R.R. 3 c/o E.C. Rice
Columbia, Kentucky

Many Marines

Dear Editor:

Am writing for several of my buddies and myself. We're in the U.S. Marine Corps in Viet Nam and are all from the Western part of the U.S., mostly Oklahoma and Texas. Our ages range from 19 to 24. It's awfully hard to get a copy of Ranch Romances over here. Would really appreciate your printing this, as we would enjoy corresponding with gals back in the world.

L/cpl DALE KENT GRAHAM 19
Cpl CHARLES EICHLER 20
L/cpl JOHN ROTTMAR 21
L/cpl BRUCE BARCLAY 21
L/cpl LYLE ROSSER 24

L/2 Trs. Bn.
3rd Marine Division "Forward"
Sub Unit #2
3rd Engr. Bn., Spt. Co.
FPO San Francisco, Calif. 96602

Desert Doll

Dear Editor:

I am 23 years old and would love to have some pen pals. I'm 5'4½" tall and like science fiction, Westerns and collecting just about anything. Am just a lonely Kansan out in the middle of a desert. Will answer all letters.

ALICE SMITH

3215 R. 52nd Pkwy.
Phoenix, Arizona

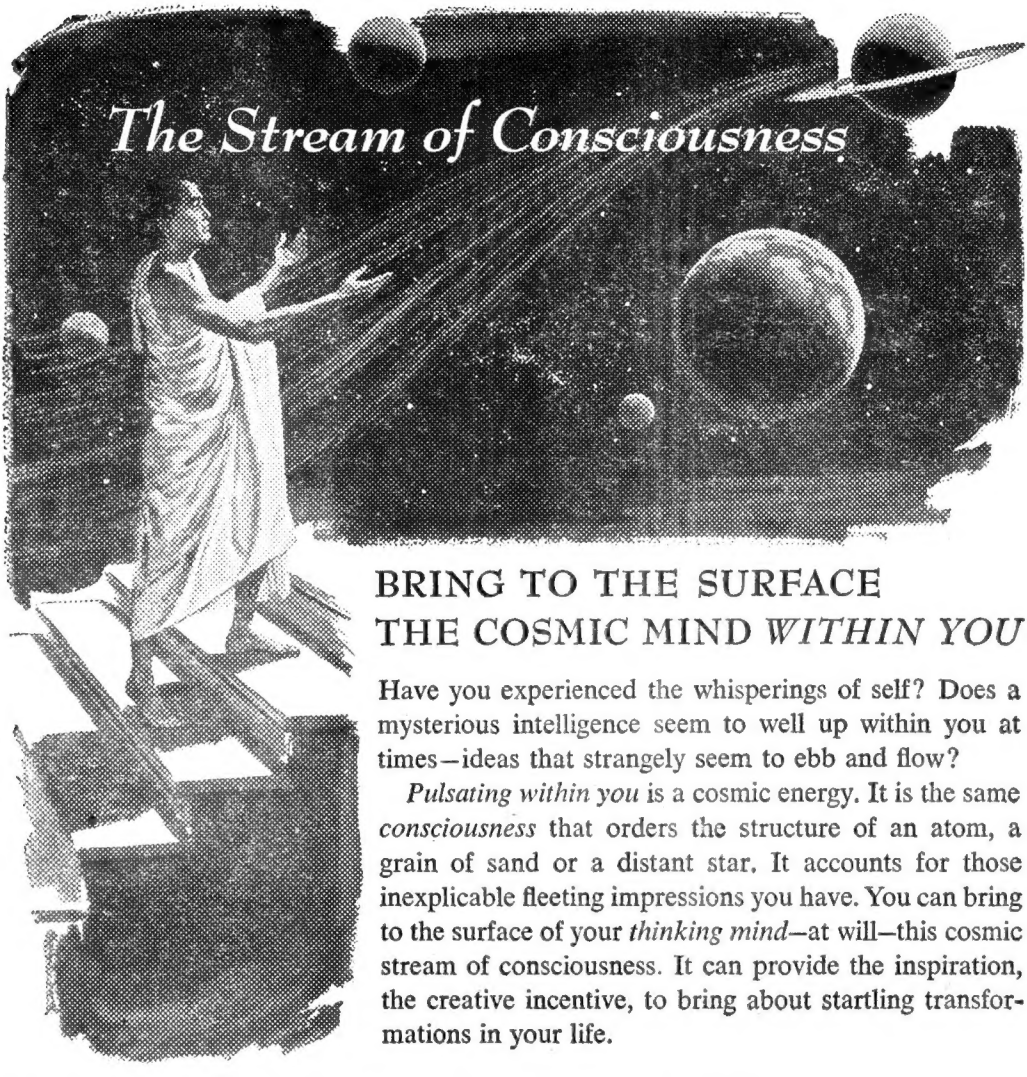
Loves Girls & Animals

Dear Editor:

Would anyone care to write a 15-year-old boy who has brown hair and eyes, stands 5'8" tall and loves girls and animals? Also like most types of sports, rock n' roll and country music. Can think of plenty of things to write, so come on, you all, and let's get this deal winging.

PAUL SNELL

P.O. Box 609
Oak Hill, West Virginia 25901



BRING TO THE SURFACE THE COSMIC MIND *WITHIN YOU*

Have you experienced the whisperings of self? Does a mysterious intelligence seem to well up within you at times—ideas that strangely seem to ebb and flow?

Pulsating within you is a cosmic energy. It is the same *consciousness* that orders the structure of an atom, a grain of sand or a distant star. It accounts for those inexplicable fleeting impressions you have. You can bring to the surface of your *thinking mind*—at will—this cosmic stream of consciousness. It can provide the inspiration, the creative incentive, to bring about startling transformations in your life.

Scribe: N.D.L.
Rosicrucian Order, (AMORC)
San Jose, California 95114, U.S.A.

I am sincere in requesting a free copy of the book, THE MASTERY OF LIFE.

NAME_____

ADDRESS_____

_____

Please Include Your Zip Code

THIS FREE BOOK EXPLAINS

The Rosicrucians (not a religion) are a world-wide brotherhood of thinking men and women. Free from fancy or fanaticism, they have had revealed the source of man's cosmic unity and how to make the most of it. They invite you to write for a free copy of the book, THE MASTERY OF LIFE. It explains this phenomenon of self. Address Scribe: N.D.L.

THE ROSICRUCIANS (AMORC)

ROSICRUCIAN PARK, SAN JOSE, CALIFORNIA 95114, U. S. A.

Paints Horses

Dear Editor:

Maybe if I keep this short it will have a better chance of getting squeezed into a small corner of OAM. I'm 21 years old, 5'8½" tall, weigh 125 pounds and have golden red hair and brown eyes. Among my interests are horses and art, and sometimes I like to combine the two by doing sketchings and paintings of horses. Would like to have pen pals from the U.S. and anywhere else, for that matter, and will exchange photos with anyone wishing to do so.

ELAINE BECHER

New Salem,
North Dakota 58563

A Willing Walter William

Dear Editor:

Have just recently started reading Ranch Romances and am sold on it. I find your "Our Air Mail" column unique and would like to have my letter added to it. Am a 28-year-old bachelor, 5'7" tall with dishwater blond hair and blue eyes. Like all outdoor sports, especially swimming. Writing and reading are my rainy-day activities. Hoping to hear from all R.R. readers, and if you send a photo, I'll do the same.

WALTER WILLIAM GRAHAM

P.O. Box 206
Huntingdon, Tennessee 38344

Diane-Debbie Duo

Dear Editor:

We are two teenage girls who live in the midst of the weeds. We'd like to hear from guys 20 to 27 years of age. Diane is 19 years old, 5'9" tall, weighs 130 pounds and has long blonde hair and brown eyes. Debbie is 5'4" tall, weighs 113 pounds, has short reddish-brown hair and blue eyes. We both enjoy Western and popular music, and love sports and outdoor life. So write — if you like crazy girls.

DIANE OGDEN

384 Recreo
Ojai, California 93023

DEBBIE MILLER

362 Recreo
Ojai, California 93023

One Al

Dear Editor:

I sure do like your superb Western stories and hope you can find a hole in OAM for me. Am just a lonely boy with nothing much to do, so could use letters from you guys and gals. Am 25, weigh 150, stand 5'7" tall. Main interests are music, jazz to opera, TV and the flick. Love horses and nature, dogs and tropical fish. Like to travel but never seem to get to. Hobbies are horticulture, cooking, fishing, reading and writing letters. Also like Greek, Roman and Christian mythology. I dig science with a passion, but don't remember names, numbers, dates, etc. Will be waiting at my garden gate for ye old mailman for your cards and letters. Age or sex no limit.

ONE AL BECK

P.O. Box 632
Port Orford, Oregon 97465

Australian-Born

Dear Editor:

I came here two years ago to live in the American West and I really love it. I'm 5'9" tall, 23 years old, Australian-born, with long fair hair and green eyes. I'm kinda shy, but I'd love to write to males (or females, too) between 25 and 35 living in the Western states (or anywhere, really).

MARIAN ROBINSON

2336 Crestwood Road,
Calgary, Alberta, Canada

Idaho Spud

Dear Editor:

Would like to hear from anyone who might like to write to an Idaho spud. I am 29 years old, stand 5'11" tall, have brown hair and blue eyes. Enjoy sports — bowling, fishing and anything else I can afford to do. Drop me a line and I'll cast mine back your way.

RICHARD E. NELSON

4912 Overland Street,
Boise, Idaho 83705

Addie Lou

Dear Editor:

Am 27 years old, stand 5'3" tall, weigh 130 and have brown eyes and black hair. My hobbies are dancing, bowling, fishing and listening to country music. Would like to hear from guys and gals all over the U.S.A., so how 'bout writing to a lil ole Southern Gal? Will answer all letters and exchange photos.

ADDIE LOU PLYER

305 Barron Street,
West Columbia, South Carolina

Guys, Gals — Garrison

Dear Editor:

Have read R.R. for a long time and especially like OAM. I'm 21, stand 6'3" and weigh 195 pounds. Have brown hair and brown eyes. Am lonely and would like to

E.S.P.?

NOW! A leading metaphysician and psychic investigator shows you how you can help yourself with the modern techniques of E.S.P.!

PSYCHIC POWERS DEMONSTRATED ON TV BEFORE MILLIONS!

A short time ago, a major TV network gave a program on Extra-Sensory Perception ("ESP") that aroused nationwide interest because of its dramatic presentation of people with amazing psychic powers—powers actually demonstrated before the eyes of millions!

Now a remarkable new book reveals exactly how you can TEST and TRAIN your astonishing ESP abilities — how to hone and perfect your ESP powers to peak performance—and how you may USE your powers to gain the rich, satisfying rewards of a healthy, prosperous, fuller and happier life.

DISCOVER AMAZING ADVANCED ESP POWERS!

In his eye-opening new book, the noted psychic investigator and ESP-authority, Dr. A. G. Manning gives you the golden fruits of a pioneering career — a voyage into the Unknown that occupied him during his 22 years of study and research into the little-known world of ESP. In this exciting book, you'll read of powers like these —

- CLAIRSENTIENCE: The power that sends psychic warnings to guard and protect you from danger (37)
- INNER VOICES that whisper messages to you that no one else can hear (pg. 39)
- "TELEPHONIC TELEPATHY" — your power to contact friends and relatives who are far away (pg. 23)
- SPIRIT PHOTOGRAPHY: the amazing power to photograph "images" of unseen beings (pg. 174)
- PSYCHOKINESIS: the power to lift and move objects by the strength of mind alone (pg. 175)
- PROPHETIC DREAMS: your amazing inborn power to "read" the future before it happens (pg. 22)
- MAKING ELECTRICITY OBEY a spoken word of command (pg. 186)

PSYCHO-HEALING AND YOUR ESP POWERS

As Dr. Manning plainly states on page 65, "a simple recognition of the vital energy-flow from the emotional body to the physical, as directed by the mental body (your mind) gives the healer more ammunition than all the scalpels and antibiotics in the country."

He says that "with only a little practice, you can learn to see the energy field around yourself" or others. This energy field, called the "aura" he describes on page 66, and gives you a simple experiment to prove it exists. He shows you how to tune your aura into a halo of HEALING LIGHT. How to direct it to specific areas of the body. How to permeate your body — drenching every organ, muscle, gland and tissue in auric energy. His book gives you a "universal healing exercise" to develop and strengthen your God-given healing powers.

HOW TO USE ESP TO GAIN RICHES

On page 91, Dr. Manning says that even as air and water move in currents, so do the tides of wealth. As he puts it: "You can set up a MENTAL CURRENT to draw riches into your life in tidal waves of abundance." His techniques for utilizing the limitless energy of ESP to attract prosperity and financial plenty into your life are truly amazing. One simple ESP-building ritual takes only 10 minutes of your time, yet sets into action a fantastic psychic current that attracts wealth like a magnet.

True-life case histories prove the power of Dr. Manning's ESP-developing techniques. On page 93, you will read of E. F., a young typist who used the wealth-building ritual, "priming the pump" with a 75¢ "offering" according to Dr. Manning's system. Almost immediately, her psychic current attracted a raise — promotion — and an offer of marriage from her boss. Today she is the happy wife of a wealthy and powerful executive.

EXPLORE AND USE THIS EYE OPENING BOOK FREE FOR TEN DAYS

In this brief space it's all but impossible to lay before you the wealth of practical, visible proof with which Dr. Manning supports his techniques. Or even to adequately describe the ESP-multiplying techniques themselves. They are so simple so easy to use — yet so astoundingly powerful — that you will be thrilled. We urge you to accept our offer today . . . read and use this book without cost or purchase obligation FREE for 10 days. Just mail the coupon below —

MAIL THIS NO-RISK COUPON TODAY

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West Nyack, New York 10994

Send me Dr. A. G. Manning's exciting new book, HELPING YOURSELF WITH E.S.P., which is mine to read and use FREE for ten days without purchase obligation. If I decide to keep this book, I will remit its cost of $5.95* plus postage and packing . . . or I will return the book, and owe nothing, pay nothing.

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hear from guys and gals of all ages. Love horses, sports, books, records, camping and all things outdoors. Will answer sincere letters and will be waiting for some to answer.

GENE GARRISON

P.O. Box 274
College City, California

Snow Shoveler

Dear Editor:

I finally plucked up the courage to drop you a line, though I've been a great Western reader for a long time, a trait inherited from my father. I have light blonde hair, blue eyes, stand 5'4" tall, weigh 135 pounds, was born under the Taurus star and am of English and Canadian descent. Am also a commercial artist who likes photography, sewing, baking, most sports (softball is my favorite) and speeding around in my metallic blue Ford. Have an extra soft spot for six-footers, age 23-30, with dark hair and sad, doggy-brown eyes. So, come on, ladies and gents, spare me a drop of ink and give me something else to do besides shoveling myself out of snow banks (snow joke!). Snapshots would be greatly appreciated.

VALERIE FARNESS

Box 318 Big Bend Highway
Revelstoke, B.C. Canada

Chris Who?

Dear Editor:

I am 35 years of age, black curly hair, brown eyes, stand 5'8½' tall and weigh 175 pounds. Am interested in photography, tennis, art, physical culture and exchanging snaps with people interested in exchanging snaps with me.

CHRIS

601 S. Vermont Avenue,
Los Angeles, California

Electronical Ed

Dear Editor:

Have read R.R. for some eleven years now, and enjoy the stories very much. Am 33 years old, single, and like reading, writing and roller skating. Have an expensive electronics hobby which I also enjoy. Would like to hear from gals my age or older, and will answer all letters as soon as time permits.

EDGAR DOUGLAS

1823 4th Ave.,
Scotts Bluff, Nebraska

Amore The Merrier

Dear Editor:

Am 21 years old, stand 5' 2½" tall, weigh 107 pounds and have long golden blonde hair. I have the misfortune, it seems, to live in or near a small town, with all my friends married and the right guy for me just not in sight. But where in the world can I find such a dream character — about 6'6" tall, muscular, with black hair, dark eyes (maybe ½ Indian) who loves horses, riding, fishing, hiking, hunting and swimming in cool mountain lakes? Oh, well, dream on you dreamer, you ... So come one, come all and write to a lonely Western miss who loves receiving and writing letters, collecting pics, recipes, scenic post cards and Western records.

JENNEATTA AMORE

Rt. 1, Box 446
Mt. Shasta, California 96067

Writes Willis

Dear Editor:

I stand 5'3" tall, weigh 105, am 19 years old and have black hair and brown eyes. My hobbies are cars, girls and reading, one of which I'd like to exchange letters with — if you can guess which one.

TERRY WILLIS

Box 45
Jasper, New York 14855

Long View

Dear Editor:

Would like to receive letters and pictures from all over the country, and though I'd love to travel, don't have the time. I'm a 47 year old widow and cook in a cafe — hope some day to have a tea shop of my own. Have three married daughters and a son in his senior year of high school. Will try to answer all letters received.

BESSIE LONG

R.R. 3
Iola, Kansas 66749

Big at Bend

Dear Editor:

It can get lonely here on the ranch, so I would like to contact some of the nice people who read Ranch Romances (the letter department suggests there are a lot of them) and are interested in the same things I am, such as horseback riding, traveling, Western music, dancing, boating, fishing and reading. I'm 32 years of age, 6'2" tall, have brown hair and eyes and weigh about 174 pounds.

STANLEY McKINNEY

Box 443, River Ranch
Bend, Oregon

A Rose by Name

Dear Editor:

I am a 16 year old girl, 5'5" tall, with dark brown hair (shoulder length) and green eyes. Love writing and receiving letters, most

(Continued on page 97)

WOLF AT HIS HEELS

BY A. E. SCHRAFF

LON MARTIN discovered he was being followed when he reached the ridge, glanced backward, and saw the dust cloud rolling across the valley floor like a tumbleweed. There was no surprise in the discovery. Tim Wells had trailed Lon from Cold Springs, across dust-choked flatland and horny mountain, when the sun was a high-flying fire and afterward when summer died and the land turned cold and flakes of ice came down to sting a man's face.

Lon raised his left hand and brushed hail off his coat, an angry curse flying from his lips. He was cold and cruelly tired, and now he couldn't stop in Norman Junction as he'd planned. He would have to ride on, deep into the miserable night, in a futile effort to elude the wolf at his heels.

It was not that Lon was afraid to meet Wells over guns, but it was that Tim Wells was a lawman, a famous and respected man in the territory, and the one who put him beneath a gravestone would not know peace again.

In the spring there had been three new graves in Cold Springs. Lon could still see them—all three. The one on the knoll with the fresh, fragrant flowers resting pitifully on the newly turned earth belonged to Sarah Wells, the lawman's wife. The other two, dug haphazardly in the most obscure part of the cemetery, belonged to the two men whose drunken gunplay had killed her. In a rage-charged moment, Tim Wells killed an old man named Cutter Martin and his son Pete, and that should have been the end of it. They were drunk and they had killed Sarah, and they drew on the lawman, and when he killed them that should have been the end of it.

But there was another Martin, a youngster named Lon. Some of the witnesses in Cold Springs swore there were three men shooting off their guns the day Sarah died. And Tim Wells had convinced himself that until Lon Martin was also punished, Sarah was not avenged. . . .

Lon rode a few more yards up the mountain before he decided. It was an ugly decision, but this had become a matter of survival. He slipped off his horse and led the animal up a precarious trail whose terminus was in the rocks. His breath flowed out from his throat in puffs of white vapor as he steadied his rifle on the smooth shoulder of a rock and fixed his eyes on the trail that would eventually bring Tim Wells into his sights.

The lawman appeared on schedule, riding slowly, cautiously, his legs close to the black horse he rode, his gun in readiness at his side. Lon's hand tightened on the rifle as he picked his target, swallowed back a feeling of revulsion, and fired.

Wells spilled from the terror-stricken dark horse and landed in the dirt, a dark moistness leaking through his trouser leg just beneath the knee. For a moment he lay there, stunned; then he lifted his eyes to the rocks.

"That was a rotten piece of shooting, Martin. You and your kin did bet-

ter when you killed my wife!"

Lon remained behind cover. He had too much sense to show his head. "I hit what I aimed for, Wells," he shouted, "and I've still got you in the sights of my rifle, so I want to see you throw your guns good and far."

Reluctantly, Wells cast his pistol into the brush.

"Now the derringer," Lon said. "I know you keep one."

"Don't have it on me now," Wells answered, grimacing with the pain of his leg wound.

"You're a liar," Lon snapped. "Throw out the derringer or I'll kill you on this damn mountain!"

Wells reached into his shirt, brought

He would rather run away than be forced to kill — but now he no longer had a choice

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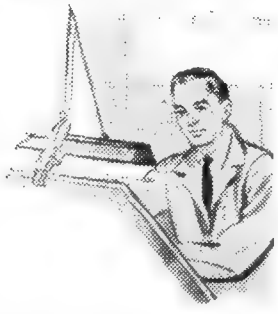

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out the tiny gun, and tossed it into the brush.

Lon stood, picked up the reins of his mustang, and started down the trail toward Wells. The snow was thickening and blowing crazily in the wind. Half a dozen times on the way down he had to blink the icy flakes from his eyes.

WHEN Lon was almost to Wells, Wells' horse reared suddenly and took off, his dark outline becoming quickly lost in the swirling snow that was rapidly whitening the high plateau. Lon swore at his bad luck and continued to the place where the lawman lay.

"I was figuring to disable you for a few weeks with that leg wound, long enough for me to get clean out of the territory. . .only your horse running off has made me a problem, Wells." Lon paused and itched the rusty growth of beard on his chin. "A man in your condition can't get much help afoot, can he?"

Wells' eyes filled with cold anger. "You trying to make me believe it matters to you if I bleed to death here?"

Lon's face darkened. "You're a lawman, Wells. When a lawman gets killed there's a tendency among brother lawmen to get together and do in the man who killed him. I don't want a pack of stars baying at my heels. You been wolf enough for my taste." Lon glanced at the wound in Wells' leg. "I better stop that bleeding."

Lon stripped off his bandana and dropped to one knee alongside the lawman. He was trying to fasten a tourniquet when Wells seized the opportunity to invest his last strength in a desperate attempt to grab Lon's side gun. Lon threw a hard, shattering uppercut that drove the badly weakened Wells into instant senselessness. Then Lon finished fixing the tourniquet, and stood up.

Lon had hoped to wound Wells just enough to force him to turn back and find a doctor. He could have made it, on the horse, and it would have given Lon enough time to ride far east —maybe to the river, where he could catch a riverboat and get lost for a while in New Orleans. But that chance was gone now.

Down in the valley below there wasn't much besides open country, except for one small farmhouse whose chimney spat gray smoke into the night. Lon decided to head for the farmhouse. With the snow falling as heavily as it was, there wasn't time to go to Norman Junction, especially with Wells' weight added to the little mustang.

Lon took Wells' star and fastened it to his own shirt; then he put the lawman in his own handcuffs, the silver manacles that had been hanging on Wells' belt. Lon dragged the lawman astride the mustang and rode for the farmhouse. He'd tell those people down there that Wells was an outlaw he was taking to Norman Junction. The star on his shirt and the manacles on Wells would be good enough evidence to convince those dull sodbusters, who believed almost anything at face value.

At the farmhouse, an old man answered Lon's knock. His hair was the silver of coins and his cheeks a childlike pink in the blustery wind.

"I'm Sheriff Martin from Wild Horse," Lon explained. "I got me a wounded prisoner who needs tending here."

Quickly the old man backed up to give Lon room to enter with his human burden slung across his shoulders. "Name's Prater, Don Prater, Sheriff. You're welcome to use the spare room."

As Lon came into the house he saw the girl. She had the same pink cheeks as the old man, and besides that she had wide-apart blue eyes and straight, shining hair that made a dark picture-frame around the prettiest face Lon could ever remember having seen.

"Katherine, this here is the sheriff

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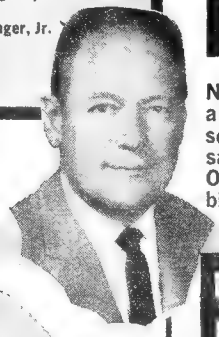

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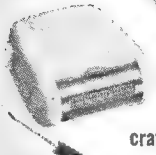

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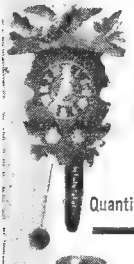

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from Wild Horse and he's got a wounded man."

The girl quickly moved in front of Lon. "I'll show you where we got the spare room."

Lon followed her into a tiny, neat room, where he dropped Wells on the bed. Then he returned his attention to the girl. "You want to be a real help, Katherine?"

She nodded vigorously. "Anything you want, Sheriff."

"I need some hot water and clean white rags." Lon paused, deciding he'd get the knife himself. He'd know best the kind of blade he'd need to take the bullet out. "Would you get me those things?"

She nodded again, stopping a moment to glance cautiously at the unconscious man's face. "He don't look too mean. Did he do something awful bad?"

Lon almost smiled. She was so young, probably seventeen or eighteen at the outside, terribly concerned with whatever was hurt, hunted or helpless. The man on the bed was all three, as far as she knew.

"He's a pretty dangerous man, Katherine," Lon answered her truthfully. Her expression grave, she disappeared to get what he wanted. Lon found himself a knife and let it turn red hot in the fire; then he watched the steel cool.

THE lead wasn't hard to get. Very quickly Lon cleaned and dressed the wound, with the girl's attentive help. She surprised Lon by not flinching before the nasty business; then she skillfully wrapped Wells' leg with the white linen. For several minutes afterward the girl's face revealed serious concern. Finally, her eyes widening enormously, she looked at Lon.

"It's not a *hanging* crime, is it?" she blurted.

"What isn't a hanging crime?"

"What he did." Her voice fell to a whisper. She could not conceive of someone she had known, even remotely, someone she had touched and tended, being taken somewhere to hang. The thought of it drew all the color from her face, making her paler than Wells.

Lon grasped her hands and smiled. "You worry about people a lot, don't you?"

"I guess maybe I do," she admitted.

"Well, don't worry about our friend here. I doubt if he'll ever hang. But don't let that make you think he isn't dangerous. He's cunning as a lame wolf; in fact he's liable to tell you when he wakes up that he's the lawman and I'm the outlaw. Yes, he's just liable to do that."

Relief flooded the girl's face. "Well, just so there's no hangman waiting for him." Her expression changed then and the clear blue eyes fixed on Lon. "I suppose it was you who shot him —understand, I know you had to—"

Lon nodded. "I had to." But for some reason Lon found himself justifying himself in front of this girl. "But I shot low on purpose so as not to kill him."

Katherine smiled, her face blooming. "I'm glad. I hate killing, especially the senseless kind. . .you know."

"I know," Lon said. His words trailed and he was remembering them again, the three graves. He had never known Sarah Wells, but they had said she was pretty, as pretty as a sunfall on the desert with its reds and golds. They also said she had a little girl named Abbie. And Lon always figured it was a terrible thing for his father and his brother to get drunk and go shooting up a town and killing an innocent woman. It made his flesh crawl to think of that woman dying in the dust for no reason. But all the same, he was no part of it. He wasn't riding with Pa and Pete. He never rode with them. He was really no part of their way of life.

Lon had never had any kin that he had the least use for except his mother, who died when he was fifteen,

leaving him to his own resources. She used to say to Lon that she had done only one really wrong thing in her life, and that was being a wife to Cutter Martin. Then she would add that God had forgiven her by letting Lon be born so unlike Pete, and unlike his father too.

But Tim Wells wouldn't believe that Lon wasn't part of that day in Cold Springs. He wouldn't believe it and he swore that eventually there would be four graves in Cold Springs, the last marking Lon's resting place.

"You're young to be a sheriff," Katherine said, breaking into Lon's thoughts.

Lon looked up. "Yeah. Well, start young, I always say." He grinned. He was actually only twenty-three, though his beard was helpful in making him look older.

"That's what Pa always says too," she smiled, "only sometimes even starting young isn't good enough. This place, I mean. Pa's worked it his whole life and—" her face clouded—"well, you must've noticed riding in. . .how rundown and all. . . ."

"Well, it was snowing pretty heavy, so I didn't notice too much."

"There was no rain for two seasons. Last summer the well went dry. Everything died. Everything." For the first time since Lon had known her, something hard entered the girl's face.

"Another well could be dug, couldn't it?"

She shrugged. "I suppose, but there's no money to hire it done and Pa—" she shook her head—"well, maybe ten years ago Pa could've done it, but. . Pa had a big spread once. He built a kind of an empire here, he wanted it that way before he took a wife. He was almost fifty when he married my mother. . .and then she died having me and it—it broke him. And then other things happened, breaking him more, and now. . . ."

"I'm sorry," Lon said softly.

The girl colored. "Oh, I should be the sorry one. I shouldn't be bothering a stranger with all our troubles. Only it's been so long since I talked to anybody, I guess it's been building or something."

"Look, I bothered you with my problems—" Lon said, indicating Wells.

Katherine smiled. "Supper'll be ready shortly. I'll call you then."

Lon watched her go, her lithe figure swaying just faintly. It wasn't something she did on purpose, it was natural. Lon smiled, but it wasn't the amused smile of an hour ago. It was a troubled smile. He tried to tell himself his worry was all because of Wells, but it was more than that. It was Kathie herself, just the simple reality of Kathie. Somehow she'd gotten to him, and it was hurting. Running from a wolf like Wells was one thing when he was running alone, without love for another living thing, but if he got mixed up with this girl. . . .

AROUND eleven at night Wells came to. Lon had been lying sleepless on a blanket Katherine had spread out for him on the floor, and now he got to his feet and went to Wells.

"Feeling better?" Lon asked him.

Wells' eyes smoked with hatred. His hands were manacled behind his back and his leg must have ached. "How come I'm still alive?"

"I told you before, I can't afford to kill a lawman."

"That's not reason enough. How would anybody know what you'd done? What's your real reason, Martin? I heard a story once about your old man Cutter. I heard he was one-fourth Apache, and one time he got a deputy sheriff from Texas and staked him to an ant hill. You planning something like that?"

"Maybe," Lon snapped. Inside, he wished he did have some of his father's lack of conscience, but the truth was that he didn't have it in him to kill a man in cold blood. He had that troublesome thing in him that reminds

some men on long nights of all their evil deeds, and makes of their lives a quiet hell.

"What've you told the people who live here?" Wells asked.

Lon sneered, "You guess."

Wells nodded. "You're even wearing my star. What do you figure that makes you? You figure another man's star can make you over from the womankiller you are?"

An angry flush brightened Lon's face. "That's a lie. You know it's a lie. I wasn't even in Cold Springs when your wife was killed. I was miles from there."

"You can't prove it."

"How does a man traveling alone prove anything about his whereabouts?"

"No need," Wells said grimly, "I know. They saw you, you and your rotten kin, the three of you. They saw you laughing and cursing, and chasing Sarah down with your horses. . .till. . . till she was near to crazy." His voice turned to a rasp and his face was white as chalk. "Then you target shot at her—and killed her!"

"Those people were too excited to count straight," Lon said. "I had no part in the killing. No jury in the territory would hold me guilty."

"I don't need a fool jury," Wells snarled.

"That's right, you don't. You've judged and executed two men already without a jury. Well, I'm not judging you. Maybe they drew down on you, like you said. But I'm not letting you execute me for something I never did. Not if I have to kill you first!"

Lon flung himself down on the blanket again and tried to sleep. For a long time he watched the snow hammering against the window, and he thought. He thought about how he'd planned, only hours ago, to ride out with the dawn and leave Wells here. It would mean that in a few hours Wells would convince these people that Lon was a merciless womankiller. Lon hadn't cared about that a few hours ago, but now he did. It was important all of a sudden that Kathy go on thinking well of him.

Suddenly, unexpectedly, Tim Wells had become not only a threat to Lon's life, but a threat to his chance for happiness, maybe the only chance that would ever come his way.

Morning came, dark and snowbound. Lon picked himself up and turned to Wells. "Just in case you got intentions of telling these people who you really are, don't try. I already told them you'd pull that. And another thing. You've made me a helluva lot of trouble for no good reason, so don't do anything to rile me or I'll bust your skull."

"I believe that. I know you already as a womankiller and backshooter. I wouldn't be surprised if you'd brain a man wearing handcuffs!"

Lon slammed his open hand across Wells' mouth, the feverishness of his anger blinding him to reason. When he backed away there was mockery in the lawman's eyes, amusement that he'd driven Lon to expose his cowardice by hitting a helpless opponent.

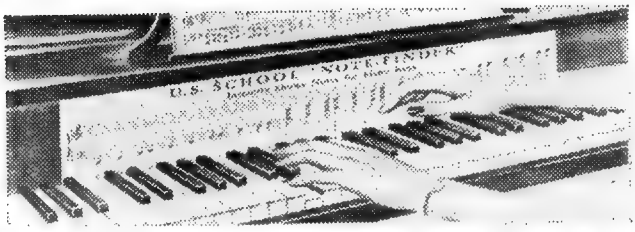
A moment later Katherine knocked on the door, and Lon forced his voice to sound even. "Come in."

She hesitated in the doorway, shy before the conscious Wells. "How are you this morning?" she asked finally. "Is your leg paining you yet?"

"I'm just fine, ma'am," Wells answered her, his lips curving into a perceptive smile. His insight had told him immediately that something existed between Lon and the girl. It was there in every look they exchanged, hidden, but obvious to the eye that looked for it.

"Well, so the killer's in love, is he?" Wells said aloud, bitter amusement distorting his features.

LON jerked a piece of the linen off the table and stuffed it into Wells' mouth. "Our friend here has a foul mouth," he said coldly securing the gag, "but we can fix that



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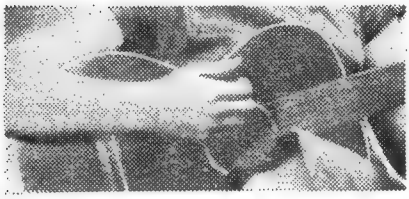

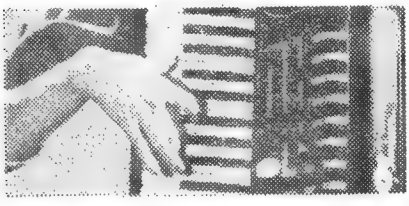

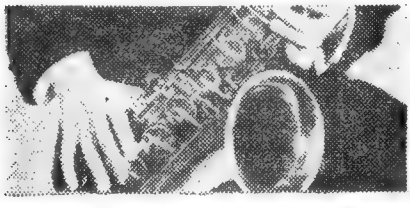

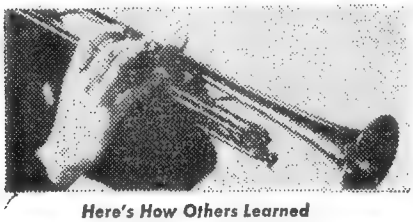

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easily enough." He looked at the girl then. "I'm sorry, Katherine."

She nodded and was gone, as swiftly as possible.

The afternoon came cold and clear. Sunshine sparkled on the snow lying in immense drifts against the broken-down fencing. When Lon and Katherine took a walk outside, they paused by the fence.

"Most of the stock wandered off," Katherine said. "Pa never got to rounding them up. It isn't that he's lazy, you know, he's just. . ." she strained from the hurt of saying it. . . "just, well, broken, I guess."

"I know. That's a way a man gets sometimes when all of life seems turned against him. I know. I've seen men struggling with problems that're beyond them. The problems stay young and tough, and a man grows old and tired. . . ."

Katherine nodded, the cold sun making her auburn hair look gold in some places. "Sometimes I think we should sell and move to Norman Junction, only Pa won't. He still feels that the land is part of him, like a son. . . ."

"It is, in a way. A man puts his sweat into the land and then it's a part of him."

The girl turned and smiled. "You understand a lot about people for such a young man, Sheriff."

"Why don't you call me Lon? My friends call me that. Hardly anybody calls me sheriff," he said.

"All right, Lon," she said, letting him put his arm around her as they continued to walk. They stopped against a stand of winter-stripped trees. "I've been talking about myself all the time," the girl said then. "What about you? You've got kin, I expect. "

"All dead."

"Oh. For a long time?"

Lon nodded. "I guess you could say so."

"You like being a lawman, Lon?"

"No."

"I didn't think you did."

"Why's that?"

Her small shoulders shrugged. "You're not the kind for it. I saw that right away. The kind of a man who worries about shooting low to keep another man alive—a lawman's life isn't for him. If you're a lawman you've got to worry about nothing but staying alive yourself, or else you'll be killed quick."

Lon's eyes roamed over the land, settling finally on a shallow place. "There's where you'd want to sink another well, Kathie."

"You think so?"

Lon stared straight ahead. His heart was pounding and he could think of no way to settle it down. A wild horse he could gentle, a maverick calf he could handle, but his own heart had gone beyond his power to control. His voice came then, strangely calm: "That'd be the place for a new well, all right. Yes, I reckon I'd like to dig one, come spring."

Her eyes touched him with the softness of a bird's wing. "*You,* Lon? *You* want to dig a well there?"

And Lon knew then that the time for talk was over. He told her in the only way he knew to tell her. He took her shoulders and brought her near enough to kiss and he wasn't surprised when her arms came up to lock around his neck. When they finally separated, Lon looked down at her seriously. "Go tell your Pa there isn't any need to move to Norman Junction. Tell him I'll make this place good again."

She smiled, then turned and ran across the snow toward the house, like a fawn that'd just discovered its legs had speed.

Lon went into the house himself, moments later. He went in the room where Wells was and closed the door behind him. He pulled a chair to the side of the bed and looked grimly at the lawman. "I've got a deal for you, Wells. You want to hear it?" As he posed the question he pulled the gag loose from Wells' mouth.

"I don't make deals," Wells snapped.

"Well, hear me out, anyway. Maybe you'll want to make this one. You've already guessed how I feel about the girl. Maybe you surmise that I aim to sink roots here. I mean to make this my life. And nobody's going to spoil it for me."

"You've got the guns, Martin," the lawman said bitterly.

"It doesn't have to be like that, Wells. You swear to me that you'll leave me alone from here on out and I'll take your word. I'll rent a wagon and take you into Norman Junction, and then it's finished between us. You won't be mending more than another couple of weeks; then you can ride back to Cold Springs and pick up where you left off."

Furious hatred gripped Wells' face. He was only about thirty-five, but he might as well have been twice that with the lines that grief and hatred had put in his face. "I should pick up where I left off? I left off when Sarah was alive. How can I just pick up?"

"I'm sorry about your wife, but you have a little girl to think about. You have her to live for, Wells, and I'm giving you the chance. You swear to me that you won't come gunning for me any more and that'll settle it. I know by your reputation that your word's sacred to you."

"I'll be gunning for you till the day I die," Wells snarled, his eyes like stones, cold and dead. Suddenly Lon saw him as he was, a dead man staying alive only for vengeance's sake. He didn't want to live without Sarah, not unless he was killing to avenge her.

"Look, Wells, you got a five-year-old kid in Cold Springs," Lon said desperately. "Doesn't she mean anything to you?"

"Sarah's sister's raising her with her own kids. Anyway, woman killer, where do you get off talking about my daughter when you and your savage kin made an orphan of her?"

"All right, Wells. You want to die so bad—*you will!*" Lon turned sharply and stalked from the room.

THERE was no sleep for him that night. Like a man under drugs or liquor, he made his plan, ignoring the revulsion it held for him, ignoring everything he'd ever believed in. He had held Kathie in his arms, and he'd glimpsed a life more full than anything he'd ever known before. He would not lose that life now, just as it was beginning. He'd given Wells every chance, and now there were no more chances. Wells did not deserve any more. He had to die. Like something sick and evil that was turning everything around it bad, he had to die....

By dawn Lon's plan was finished, honed to perfection in every detail. His eyes cavernous in his head through lack of sleep and the enormity of what he knew he must do, he rose while the sun was still only a pale rose suggestion in the sky. He went out to the barn and saddled his mustang, leading the animal outside and tethering it within sight of the spare room's window. All Wells would have to do was turn his head and he would see the saddled horse. That would be the bait. Even with his wounded leg, he would believe he had a chance to make it to the horse. But he would have no chance.

Lon returned to the room. He shook Wells awake, then shoved him forward and unlocked the handcuffs. Wells' eyes widened in surprise. "What's this supposed to mean?"

"It doesn't matter. You can't get anywhere anyway," Lon answered, deliberately avoiding looking at the other man. He left the room quickly after that.

Lon's hands were trembling visibly as he took his place behind the well. He rubbed them dry of their heavy perspiration before he grasped the rifle. This place afforded an excellent view of the open ground between the window and the waiting horse. It would be a simple matter to pick off Wells as he covered the distance. And it would look like a case of shooting a

prisoner who was trying to escape. Kathie would feel bad, but after a while she would understand. Lon could take Wells' body up onto the plateau and bury it before anyone was the wiser about the fate of Cold Springs' wandering sheriff.

Lon marked time, figuring that it would take Wells about five minutes to decide to make a break for it. He would, of course, realize the possibility of an ambush, but, on the other hand, if he didn't try to escape he knew that Lon could kill him at any time anyway. What Lon knew of the lawman indicated that Wells would take the chance.

Within the next seconds, Wells loomed against the clear dawn. He moved slowly, limping badly on the wounded leg. He crouched as he moved, his eyes scanning the area as if he suspected that Lon was somewhere with a rifle. Midway between the house and the saddled horse he spotted Lon behind the well, and a desperate horror struck his face. He broke into a kind of run, knowing he wouldn't be fast enough to outrun Lon's rifle shot, yet trying from the sheer instinct that is in a man to stay alive, even after life has become valueless.

Lon aimed the rifle just as Wells' wounded leg collapsed under him, sprawling him into the gray slush that was yesterday's snow. Frantically, Wells tried to rise, but his legs had twisted and he couldn't. He clawed the air, trying to grasp the hanging reins of the mustang, but the animal remained cruelly out of reach.

Lon's hand slid down the walnut stock of the rifle and he gripped the weapon in both hands, hurling it violently away from him, as a man might hurl a snake. He got to his feet and moved quickly across the snow to Wells, lowering his hand to pull the other man erect.

THE lawman's face was still gray, his lips utterly without color. Death had come so close that he'd tasted it, felt its breath. He leaned against the barn, his eyes closed. Lon shoved the reins of the mustang into Wells' hand, the sheriff's eyes snapped open.

"Get out of here," Lon said softly. "You can make it to Norman Junction easy on a good horse like this. And if you're of a mind to, you can buy another gun and come back, and can have your gunfight. . . ."

Wells stared at Lon. "You couldn't have been one of them who killed Sarah. A man who'd kill a woman like that would've shot me when he had the chance."

Wells climbed astride the mustang, his eyes still on Lon. The ghost of a smile touched his lips. "Good luck," he said.

Lon returned the smile. "The same to you."

Lon stood there, aware of nothing but stunned relief, watching the mustang vanish. Then he realized that Katherine was beside him.

"Why, Lon, your man is getting away," she said.

A slow grin came to the young man's mouth. "Oh, don't worry about it, Kathie. He wasn't as bad a man as I thought."

Then Lon pulled the girl against him so quickly that it made her laugh, and he swung her around in his arms because suddenly the world was good, and it was his again.

LIVE BAIT

BY LEE MARTIN

Maria had thought she could lead this man to his death with a clear conscience — but now, when it was too late, she knew that he didn't deserve to die

JOE, I can't do it," she said, tears in her eyes.

"He was your husband and my brother! That's reason enough!"

He shoved her against the wall, and she turned her back to him, a sob caught within her breast. Her dark hair was damp around her face and throat, and grief was twisting her reasoning.

"Maria, I saw Rob hang. We both know who brought him in, and the same man hung him. Radigan has got to die."

"But maybe Rob was guilty—"

"Rob never hurt a living creature and you know it."

"But they said he killed those men and robbed them."

"Maria, it was a lie!"

She tried to calm herself, but the pain was deep and sharp. She had waited three months for Rob to return with his brothers, the four of them having ridden south into Texas to buy cattle. Rob had never returned. The news of his death had brought a sickness she could not fight.

"It was Radigan who had all the evidence," Joe said. "He was the one got Rob strung up. They listened to him because he was a lawman. They didn't listen to Rob or to me or Pete or Regie. I tell you, Rob was innocent."

"But it's no use," she said, pressing hard to the wall. "I can't ride in there and face him."

"You can, and you will. You'll get Radigan out of that town, to Split Rock Canyon. We'll be waiting. You just tell him what I said. He'll believe you."

"All right," she whispered. "Just leave me alone."

She heard the cabin door close as he left, and she drew a deep, unhappy breath. Her marriage had been stormy and unhappy, but it wasn't fair that Rob had died for something he hadn't done. Joe was right, she told herself. This Radigan, this lawman, had to die.

When she had composed herself she walked to the door, smoothing her green riding outfit, pressing back her long dark hair. She moved into the sunlight, and she looked at the three remaining brothers—all young, hard, fast with a gun, always ready to laugh and ready to fight. Joe was the oldest, grimy and bearded. All had shades of red in their hair, and all were watching her, waiting.

"I'm ready," she said, and Joe brought up her horse.

"Remember, Maria, it's for the Brinson name."

She rode away from them, remembering Rob's laughter, his kisses, his love for her. She hadn't loved him in the same way but she had been grateful for his love, and she owed him something. She owed him whatever had to be done.

The town of Sleepy Creek was nestled in a canyon in the green foothills, twelve miles from Split Rock Canyon. As she rode into the busy street, she glanced at the hanging tree near the edge of town, standing grotesque and grim, a shredded rope still dangling.

She reined up near the office of the town marshal, noting that the door was open in the early heat of the day. She looked up and down the street. No one was watching her. Women were busy with children, and men were chewing the fat. A wagon full of firewood rolled on by, and a baby was crying.

SHE forced herself to go into the law office, but it was empty. She walked inside, staring at the vacant desk, the open doors of the cells. She had never been in a jail before and it seemed frightening.

"Yes, ma'am?"

She turned to stare at the man behind her. He wasn't too tall nor too stocky, just an average man with a badge on his shirt. His face was rough, like the prairie, and he was smiling, easy, friendly, watching her curiously.

He wasn't the evil-faced killer Joe had pictured, and she felt her courage fading.

Yet her words came just the same. "I need help," she said. "My father was hurt."

"Where?"

"In a canyon north of here, with a big boulder split open near the entrance. His leg is broken. I set it, but I can't move him."

"All right, let's go."

Just like that, she thought—so easy. no questions asked. Numbly, she walked outside with him, and he brought his horse around to hers.

"What's your father's name?"

"Grimes."

"And yours?"

"Maria."

They mounted, and he smiled at her. "I'm Radigan."

I know, she thought, and they started to ride up the busy street, the sun in their eyes. A group of boys near the livery stable were boxing around, and suddenly it was a fight. Two boys of maybe ten were rolling on the ground, clawing viciously at each other.

Radigan spun his horse to the scene, with Maria following. He swung to the ground and yanked the boys apart. Their faces were muddied and one had a cut near his eye.

"All right, what started it?"

"Marshal, that dirty breed got no right—"

Before the boy could finish, Radigan shook him hard. "You boys got no right to call anyone a breed. You got proof what blood each of you has? You, Jeremy, you got papers saying you're all white? Billy, what law says you are pure clean through?"

"I'm going to tell my pa on you," Jeremy shouted.

Radigan turned to the boy they had called a breed. "You, Jess, you got anything against these boys?"

"Yeah, they're white," Jess said angrily.

"Get your horse and come along with us," Radigan said sternly, and the boy brought his white pony forward and mounted.

Maria was frightened to have the boy riding with them, and she was silent as Radigan lectured the youth. They were out of town now, the sun hot with no breeze from the plains.

"Jess, if you'll quit fighting the whole town, you might find time for something else," Radigan was saying. "Like learning to use that old rifle."

"I know how to use it," Jess snapped.

"You couldn't hit the broad side of a barn."

Jess reined up, angry. He drew his rifle and watched a moment as a buzzard, riding the wind, passed overhead. Then he fired, even as his pony moved. The buzzard swerved, feathers flying, and sped away. The Indian boy smiled with satisfaction.

"Not bad," Radigan admitted. "You could be out hunting to feed your family instead of in town fighting."

"I'm not running from anybody," the boy said.

"Children fight in the street," Radigan said. "Men hunt."

Jess eyed him carefully. "Easy to say when you're white."

"How do you know I'm white?"

Jess gazed at him, rubbing his tanned face. "Are you?"

"Are you going to ask every man you meet if he has Indian blood?"

Suddenly, Jess grinned. He slid his rifle into the scabbard, understanding, and they rode on in silence.

When they saw the great split boulder marking the canyon ahead, Radigan turned to the boy. "I might need some help."

"To fight?" the boy asked, his hand on the rifle.

"This young lady's father was hurt. I need to rig up a travois."

The boy nodded, eager to be needed. Maria felt cold, shaken, her heart pounding. The boy would be a witness. Surely now Rob's brothers would hold off, and she was glad. They rode

into the canyon, where a spring left a trail of lush green grass across the clearing. The emptiness seemed to shout at them.

Radigan reined up. "Where is he?"

"At the canyon end," she said, "in the shade."

They sat a moment, and the boy leaned forward. "Other horses come first. Three horses."

MARIA felt color rushing into her face, and she trembled under Radigan's steady gaze. Then the lawman turned to the boy.

"Look for a horse that singlefoots."

Jess swung down, squatting, checking the wet earth and the turned grass. Silence held the air still; Maria was breathless, shaken.

"It is the same horse," Jess said, standing, his small face twisted with curiosity. "The same signs I read that day for you."

"What signs?" Maria asked.

"When I found three men shot in the back," Radigan said. "One man hung for it, but the others got away."

Others? Maria stared at him. No, she thought, frantic, her heart wild. Rob couldn't have done it. Not any of the brothers. Yet if they were guilty, what better way to silence their enemy? She was sick, twisted inside, afraid, and panic gripped her. Was she leading an innocent man to his death? She looked at Radigan, so calm, so quiet, and so kind to a boy with Indian blood. There had to be good in him, and yet he had hung the one man who had ever meant anything to her.

"And here," Jess said, "the same horse with the split hoof."

"That's it," Radigan said. "They're up there waiting."

"But how do they know you come?" Jess asked, mounting.

Radigan looked at Maria, and tears stung her eyes. She turned her horse wildly about and dug in her heels, riding crazily toward the canyon entrance. His horse came full speed to her side, and his arm spread out around her, jerking her from the saddle, against him. Her horse spun away, and she was held in an iron grip as he reined to a halt. His breath was hot on her face.

Tears ran down her cheeks, and she tried to look away. With his free hand he twisted her face so their eyes met. He held her against him, hard and angry, and yet his face was quiet.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Maria Brinson," she whispered.

"Rob Brinson's wife?"

She nodded, and he set her down, dismounting to take her arm. "Listen to me, Maria. There were four men. They shot three men in the back, but that wasn't all—or didn't you know? They also raped a young girl in the camp. I found her and she identified your husband. I'm pretty sure she'd remember the others, if she had lived."

"I don't believe you!" she cried.

"It is true," Jess said.

"Jess, ride back to town for my deputy," Radigan said. "Tell him to bring another man."

"But I am a man! You said I was a man," Jess said.

"I know, but we need more. Hurry now."

Jess gazed at him, hurt but agreeable, and then rode his pony from the canyon. Maria watched him go, knowing Radigan had done this to save the boy. She was relieved, but when she looked at the lawman she knew he should not die.

"Marshal," she said quietly, "I can't believe what you said."

"You should," said Joe Brinson, on a rock above them.

"Drop it, lawman," Pete said, rising from the brush.

Radigan slowly unbuckled his gunbelt, letting it fall by his feet as he watched the three brothers emerge from their cover. Maria stared at their faces, so ready to kill, to cover the truth, and then she knew they had lied to her.

"Let him go," she said.

Joe put his arm around her. "It'll be easy on him, Maria, a lot easier than it was on Rob."

"You lied to me."

"So we did," Joe said, hugging her. "So what? The girl was Rob's idea, you know. He was always the leader."

"And you are now?" she asked, trying to pull away.

"That's right, and you belong to me now."

"How'll we do it?" Pete asked, standing closer to the lawman.

"Cut him up, let 'em think Apaches did it," Joe advised. He shoved Maria aside, balancing his sixgun in his hand. "Then we'll spread-eagle 'im and cook his brains."

Maria was speechless, seeing these three young men she had once admired, watching them show just how cruel and vicious they could be. Maybe she had never known Rob at all. She was sick, pains cutting through her body. This was all her doing. A good man was going to die because of her.

Suddenly a shot rang out. Pete spun around, clawing at his face where blood spurted. Regie and Joe went wild, whirling to dodge from the sniper as another bullet cut through Joe's arm.

RADIGAN dropped, rolling with his gun in his hand, firing up as Joe rushed him. The bullet hit Joe in the belly and the outlaw crashed forward. Radigan shoved him aside and aimed at Regie, but the third man was already crumbling to the ground, clutching his stomach.

Maria's screams were frozen in her throat. She ran to Radigan's side, helping him rise to one knee, but he wasn't hurt and she started to pull away. He caught her by the waist and held her to his side as he stood up, and they watched Jess climb down from the rocks with his old rifle.

The boy was grinning. "You told me to be a man, to hunt."

Radigan swallowed hard, then grinned. "What about Maria?" the lawman said, still holding her. "What shall we do with her?"

Jess grinned, his teeth white and shining. "Jail?"

"No, that's too easy for her," Radigan mused.

"Spank her?"

"No, she has so many petticoats on she'd not feel it."

Angry, Maria fought to free herself, but Radigan kept her tight in the circle of his arm. She looked at their grinning faces, and she fought even harder.

"My father says," Jess said thoughtfully, "that when you cannot tie a woman up and you can't spank her hard enough, then there is only one other thing to do."

"What's that?" Radigan asked.

"He didn't tell me," Jess said, grinning.

Maria broke free and ran toward the horses. Radigan ran after her, catching her and pinning her against the horse, while she fought frantically to free herself. He bent his head, and he kissed her, hard. Then he backed away. She was breathless, her lips stinging.

"That's as far as I go," he said. "From now on you'll have to come to me."

He turned and walked away. Maria stared after him, her heart singing, a dizziness overcoming her. She found herself walking after him, even though he didn't look back. He kept walking up the canyon, past the dead men, past a grinning Jess, and she followed. At last he stopped and they faced each other.

"I came," she said, hesitant, "but I don't know why."

He held out his arms and she moved into them, and he held her, and she knew he was right. A strange feeling had come over her, as if a whole new world was awaiting her, this man's world, a way of life she was suddenly hungering for; and she knew that with him everything would be right for the first time.

She was savage and cruel, and only a fool would be taken in by her beauty

indian girl

BY MONA JENNINGS

HE WAS so preoccupied with the idea of getting home before dark that he wouldn't have seen the figure if his horse hadn't shied and made two quick sidesteps to avoid coming closer to her. Darb halted the horse, automatically mouthing words designed to sooth the animal, while his eyes scanned the area, searching for the cause of the horse's fear.

When nothing met his eyes he allowed himself to relax slightly, but he was mentally berating himself for his lack of concentration. A man in this country, he thought wryly, has no right to think about home until he's gotten there, or he might not get there alive. He tightened his grip on the reins and was ready to move again when he spotted her.

Over by the trees, about two hundred yards to his right and partially hidden by the late-afternoon shadows

in the woods, a small figure was seated, huddled and hugging her knees, head down. Darb urged the horse forward at a trot, without stopping to think; the dejected appearance of the figure convinced him that something was wrong. Probably one of Mel Linclon's traps, he thought angrily.

He was almost upon her before he realized that she was an Indian—Sioux, by her dress. At the moment of his discovery, she heard and discovered him. She lifted her head from her arms and favored him with a long, arrogant stare.

As he swung from his horse he saw that he had guessed correctly. Her right ankle was caught between jaws of savage steel, and the grass around the trap was bloodstained. It didn't occur to him to speak to her as he looked around for a stick big enough to help him open the trap. A white woman would have been hysterical, but her steady gaze told him that in spite of the pain she must be suffering, she needed no words of encouragement. At last he broke off a sturdy branch from the tree she was under, and, trimming it down to his needs, he asked, "You speak English?"

She nodded, as though his conversation didn't interest her very much.

"Okay, listen," he ordered quickly. "When I get this open, pull your foot out—but not before I say, understand?"

She nodded again, but winced this time, as he stuck the branch into the jaw of the trap. Darb strained, cursing when the trap resisted his efforts. Lucky for the girl, he thought, the jaws weren't rusty, but the moving parts must be. At last, with a mighty pull, he managed to get the trap partially open. Then he caught the jaw with his foot and pushed. "Now!" he yelled breathlessly.

She pulled her foot free, and he allowed the jaws to snap with a clank, jumping clear as he did so. When he had righted himself the girl was leaning against the tree watching him, obviously more spent by the exertion necessary in freeing her than he was.

"All right?" he asked. He felt foolish the moment the words left his mouth; when she didn't answer, he added, "Is your ankle broken?"

"I don't think so," she replied calmly.

He knelt at her side and touched the injured ankle, and she closed her eyes. It was the only sign, but he didn't touch her again. "I'll get the horse over here," he said, "and get you to my cabin."

He didn't wait for her to protest, if she intended that. Instead he moved away from her, caught the reins of his horse and led it back to her side. He had little trouble lifting her into the saddle, but getting on behind her without bumping her injured ankle proved more difficult. At last he managed to perch himself unsteadily behind her and coax the horse forward.

He found himself grinning as he thought about his sister Carol and his little brother Gil, and what their reactions would be when they saw him riding up with an Indian girl. Their experiences with Indians had been limited since that day over four years ago when their parents had been with a wagon train attacked by the Indians, and had been killed. The memory sobered him, and a low moan wrenched from the girl in front of him completely erased the grin. He thought unhappily, she's just a kid, not much older than Carol, certainly not yet twenty; what had she been doing around those trees, that close to the white settlements?

It was almost dark when he slid off the horse before his own cabin. He turned to help the girl down, but she ignored his outstretched hand and dismounted on the other side of the animal. She limped as she walked with him toward the house, but he knew certainly now that she had at least been lucky enough to escape without a broken ankle.

"WHAT is she doing here?" Carol demanded, almost before Darb could close the door behind them.

"An Indian!" Gil crowed happily, at the same instant. Gil had been five years old when his parents were killed; he had seen none of the horror, and he remembered little about the battle. Carol had been twelve; she had forgotten nothing.

"She needs some help," Darb returned simply.

"Not my help!" countered Carol, throwing Gil an angry look to quell his excitement, and Darb an even angrier one.

Darb shrugged. "Okay. I'll do it myself." Turning to the girl, he instructed, "Get over there on that bed. I'll heat up some water."

The Indian hesitated, then obeyed, as though she realized that she had no choice; she couldn't hope to get back to her people in her condition. She made an effort not to limp as she walked by the angry Carol, but Darb noted the look in Carol's eyes as she saw the blood-smeared ankle.

Darb poked at the fire and threw on two more pieces of wood, then placed the kettle over the flame. He knew that Carol had some cloths she held in reserve as bandages, but he didn't know where she kept them, so he tore one of his old shirts into strips as he crossed over to the Indian girl.

She was sitting gingerly on the edge of the bed. He knelt at her side, trying to inspect the wounds on her foot without touching her before he had to, before the water was boiled. One gash, near the ankle bone, an inch from the heel, looked the deepest, and another, near the front of the ankle, was bleeding the most profusely, but as far as he could see the trap had merely cut across, not very deeply.

"You are foolish," she said quietly.

Darb looked up, surprised, saw that she was looking at Carol, and he grinned foolishly. "Oh. Because I don't make her obey me?"

The Indian nodded, meeting his gaze. "And for helping me."

He shrugged. "Why shouldn't I help you?"

She seemed to consider his question, as though she hadn't expected it. At last she said, "Because I wouldn't have helped you if I had found you like that." Then, just as earnestly, she added, "And because you know my people have been raiding the white men's homes far from the towns."

"You weren't raiding anything when I found you," he commented wryly. "And besides, I'm not as foolish as you think I am. I'm half right, anyway. She'll come around." He motioned over his shoulder at Carol.

As if that were a signal for her, Carol stepped forward and stood at his side, looking down with distaste at the injured ankle. "I'll heat up some soup," she said matter-of-factly. "She must be weak after losing all that blood."

"Okay," Darb agreed, grinning triumphantly at the Indian girl as soon as Carol had turned. The Indian returned his grin with a look that was half respectful and half puzzled.

THE bandaging was done in silence, both on the part of the amateur doctors, and, with more difficulty, on the part of the injured. When the task was completed, the Indian girl sank back in exhaustion, and the brother and sister left her to rest.

After a few minutes she rose to her feet and uncertainly made her way to the door. Darb watched without comment, then returned his attention to Gil. Carol, however, started to move after the Indian, until Darb's voice caught her at the door. "Let her alone," he instructed.

Carol looked puzzled. "But she's sick. . . ." she began.

He grinned. "I thought you weren't worried about the health of an Indian.

Besides," he added soberly, "it took quite a bit of effort for her to get out of here, away from us, so we wouldn't see her be sick. Don't go out and shame her."

Carol took a backward step. "Oh!" she exclaimed.

A few minutes later the Indian returned, and Darb noted with amusement that Carol was following his lead, and was deeply interested in a book, too interested even to look up when the girl limped painfully back to the bed.

That night Darb slept on the floor. In the morning when he awoke, the Indian girl was gone and so was his horse.

Gil was the one who became angry this time. Of the two horses the family owned he had always considered the old plowhorse, Cotton, to be his horse. Now that Darb was forced to use the animal for trips to town, he had suddenly become horseless. Strangely, Carol spoke little about the stolen animal, as though she had developed a sort of rapport with the Indian girl, and hated to speak of the act she had committed against them.

Darb realized that this was because Carol had no girls her own age within miles, and perhaps she still felt a pang of guilt about refusing to help the injured girl when she arrived. Whichever it was, she didn't utter an accusation.

Darb, after the first disappointment, began to philosophize about the loss; he had lost two cattle the year before by disease, and a dog that his parents had brought west with them had been killed by some wild animal. Out here losses were a part of the ritual of living; if a man dwelt on them he would grow to hate the land. Darb knew he could learn to hate this farm, the only thing he had ever owned. The horse could have been lost in another kind of Indian raid, one that could have left him and the children dead or wounded. That the girl had left in the night without trying to harm them had been a kind of luck.

After a week, when he was convinced that he had consoled himself over his loss, she brought back the horse.

He was using Cotton to plow in the field beside the house when he heard the familiar neigh of the horse. He looked up quickly and saw the girl a few feet from him, watching him. She was riding an Indian pony, bareback, and she was loosely holding the rope around his horse's neck. Across the back of his animal was a slain deer, and behind that a skin thrown over something. He noticed all of this as he stared, but what held his attention was the girl. She's beautiful, he thought; she's the proudest, most beautiful creature I've ever seen, and when she was hurt I hardly noticed her.

Aloud, he greeted her, and asked about her injured foot.

She slipped gracefully from the horse's back, and, without answering his question, said, "I have brought you food to repay you for helping me. And your horse."

He grinned. "You don't have to repay anything," he told her. "The horse was all I wanted, and I had given up on that."

She raised her head a little higher. "I meant always to bring him back to you," she said haughtily, "and I meant always to repay you. You didn't have to help me."

Darb hid his amusement, saying soberly, "Well, we sure can use the meat. Thanks."

That seemed to please her. "There is something for the boy and the girl. In the fur."

Darb nodded; then, seeing that she was about to mount her pony, he said hastily, "No, stay a while. You have to. . . .eat some of this venison with us."

She looked at him quizzically. "Women don't eat with men," she said flatly.

"They do here," he countered.

She smiled then, the first smile he had seen on her face, and he saw it transform even her loveliness into something more. "Women are men here," she said.

"And men are women," he grinned wryly. "I know. You don't think I beat my women enough."

"You are weak," she agreed honestly. But she was moving away from the pony.

He frowned at her in mock anger. "There's a difference between weakness and gentleness," he offered.

She shook her head. "To be gentle is to be weak."

"Okay," he grinned, "I'm a weakling. Therefore it's perfectly safe for you to stay with me and eat. Will you?"

She shook her head again. "No. I must go back. I talked with you."

She made it sound as if it were a chore that she had to submit to because he had helped her, and he laughed aloud. "Yes, you did," he agreed. "But will you come back? I would like to have you come back."

She considered for a long moment, after mounting her pony. At last she said judiciously. "I don't know." At that, she turned her pony's head and started him off at a trot. Darb watched her out of sight, and only then became aware that his sister was standing beside him.

"I knew she'd bring back the horse," Carol declared, in almost the same tone that the Indian girl had used in deciding that she "didn't know."

Darb shook his head in amazement. "I didn't," he admitted honestly.

ON HER third visit, Darb learned that her name was Kwanani. She had been strangely hesitant about telling him this at first, but on the third visit she told him without reservations only minutes after she arrived.

Even before her third visit Darb knew he was in love with her. He didn't speak of it to her, because he knew she didn't return his feelings. She was fascinated by him, yes; he realized that the very thing she scorned in him attracted her. . .his gentleness. Maybe it was just the contrast between him and the Indian braves that made him an oddity in her life; he didn't know, but he clung to his differentness because it did attract her.

Maybe it is her wildness that attracts me, he reflected after she had gone that day. Maybe we're both caught up in an ironic fascination of the different.

For he knew that her pride, her wonderful arrogance, was one source of his love, and he knew that this was as much a part of her heritage as was his heritage of kindness, bred into him by his parents.

On her next visit she arrived while he was in town for supplies, and was waiting for him when he returned. On any other day he would have been pleased by this, for she had never before waited for him, but on this day he was too preoccupied even to notice.

His face was grim as he greeted her. "The Matson family south of here was wiped out a few hours ago," he declared soberly. "Three children. Three little children."

She waited, then said evenly, "They are renegades."

"I know," he amended quickly. "I wasn't trying to start a tribal war with you. I know we're 'officially' at peace. But those children and their parents are still dead."

"Did you care for those children?" she asked quietly.

"I didn't know them!" Shortly.

He saw a flicker of contempt in her eyes; then she asked mockingly, "Is that what it means to be gentle? To weep for people you don't know?"

"No!" he snapped, then, "Yes! Yes, it does, but I wish I'd never spoken that word! You use it like a club."

"You use it to hide behind," she retorted coolly. "We have no words like that. . .words with meanings to

give comfort to those who refuse to use the real words."

"Like weak. I know. But your people hide behind actions, if we hide behind words. You consider it an act of nobility to mutilate a dead body!"

Now you've done it, he thought, even in his anger. Her pride will never allow you to attack her beliefs.

He waited for her reaction, watching the anger cloud her eyes; but then suddenly, to his surprise, she smiled at him. "Don't put your hand by your rifle," she said levelly.

In spite of her attempts to act casual, he spun around quickly and saw three mounted Indians halted about ten yards from him, watching him. He could also feel the eyes of the girl on him as his fingers ached for the feel of the rifle she'd told him not to touch.

"What do you want?" he demanded harshly.

None of the three answered. They seemed to be taken aback to find a Sioux girl there, although they allowed no surprise to show on their emotionless faces. Emotionless, Darb thought angrily—they had killed five people, including three helpless children, probably with the same empty countenances.

Slowly, one of the braves nudged his horse forward, at the same time casually shifting his rifle until it leaned barrel forward against his thigh. The other two Indians followed, moving apart slightly to give them command of the area.

Darb waited grimly until the first brave was beside him, peering haughtily down at him from his horse, and then snarled, "Get out of here!"

The cold eyes flickered, and the rifle barrel moved. Darb stepped back a step, closer to his horse, his rifle.

The Indian girl spoke quickly, saying, "Don't hurt him. He's. . .he's gentle."

She's apologizing for me! Darb thought in a roar of rage. She's ashamed for me before them!

HIS temper snapped, and he weeled around, not certain whether he was being driven by his hatred for men who would slaughter children or by his love for a girl who couldn't respect him. "I'll show you!" he shouted at them all, and grabbed for his rifle.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw the Indian girl throw herself at the horse of the nearest brave—the one he would have to take first, he thought grimly, the one with his rifle already aimed. But her move changed that; the horse jerked nervously, then reared as she pulled savagely at the reins. Darb couldn't follow what happened next, for he had to wheel and fire at the brave to his left.

He couldn't even pause to see if he had hit the Indian, of if the other Indian was again aiming at him; he had to whirl and fire at the farthest brave. He heard two, three shots as he moved, and expected the impact of a bullet at any second. But when he had turned toward the last brave he saw that he was partially protected by the horse of the first Indian, which was now riderless. He crouched lower. The third Indian saw his own disadvantage then, and he slouched low over the horse he rode, trying to swing his rifle into position to fire from the awkward stance. But Darb shot quickly, and this time he took the time to see the rider slip from the horse and lie unmoving in the dirt. Then he wheeled about again.

There were now three riderless Indian ponies, one standing patiently beside the body of the first brave Darb shot at, the other still maneuvering nervously near the spot where the Indian girl stood, a rifle held loosely in her hand. The third pony was wandering aimlessly away from an Indian groping about blindly for his rifle. Darb walked over and picked up the rifle, but by the time he reached it the Indian was no longer moving. He glanced then at the Indian lying beside the girl, the one who had ad-

vanced first. He saw that he, too, had been shot.

"They were renegades," Kwanani said quietly.

He saw the look of bewilderment in her eyes, and he knew she was trying to figure out why she had shot one of her own people in defense of a white man.

"Yes," he said, breathing hard.

That seemed to remind her that he was still there, still alive. "They might not have done anything if you'd listened," she said accusingly. Her eyes crept painfully back to the body, and said silently, I wouldn't have had to kill if you'd listened.

"Might," he repeated mildly. He turned meaningfully toward the house, to where Carol and Gil appeared in the doorway, Carol carrying an old flintlock that had belonged to her father.

Kwanani glanced at the figures of his brother and sister crossing the clearing toward them, but he had a feeling that she was still seeing only the body of the Indian she had killed. When the boy and girl were halfway across the clearing, she turned and walked slowly to her pony.

Carol didn't look down at the bodies of the Indians, although Gil seemed to be fascinated with them. Instead, Carol stood beside Darb and watched the Indian girl ride away.

Darb sighed. "She won't be back," he said tonelessly.

"Why do you say that?" Carol demanded.

How can I explain it? Darb wondered miserably. How can I tell her that I saw the fear in Kwanani's eyes when she realized that she'd killed for me? That I know she'll have to be scornful if she tries to figure out why she did it? I don't know for certain why she did it, but if it had anything at all to do with love, I know she'll fight that, be more alienated by that than she was by the act it had driven her to.

I can't explain how I know, he decided miserably, so he said aloud, "I don't know. I just know she won't."

Carol shook her head. "You," she pointed out firmly, "didn't expect her to bring the horse back, either."

TALL TALES FROM THE WEST

SURE 'nough cowboys—and believe it or not, there still are a lot of them—are pretty unfond of any kind of work they cannot do on horseback. The manager of a big New Mexico ranch had decided to build a lot of new fence and was gently breaking the news to his cowpuncher crew that they would have to dig the post holes.

"The last outfit I rode for," said a saddle-bowed buckaroo solemnly, "always sent off to Monkey Ward and bought their post holes ready made."

"I've sent in my order," replied the manager without cracking a smile. "The ready-made post holes will be here any day now, and all you boys will have to do is scoop out a few places to set 'em in!"

OLDTIME cowboys were never noted for being talkative, and there are at least a few of the breed left. Assuming the managership of a big New Mexico cattle ranch, a friend of mine rode out to look things over with the weathered old cowhand who had been wagon boss on the ranch for nearly 30 years. Noting that the ranch was well equipped with pasture fences, the new manager asked the wagon boss a casual question.

"How many gates do you reckon there are altogether on the ranch, Bill—about 100?"

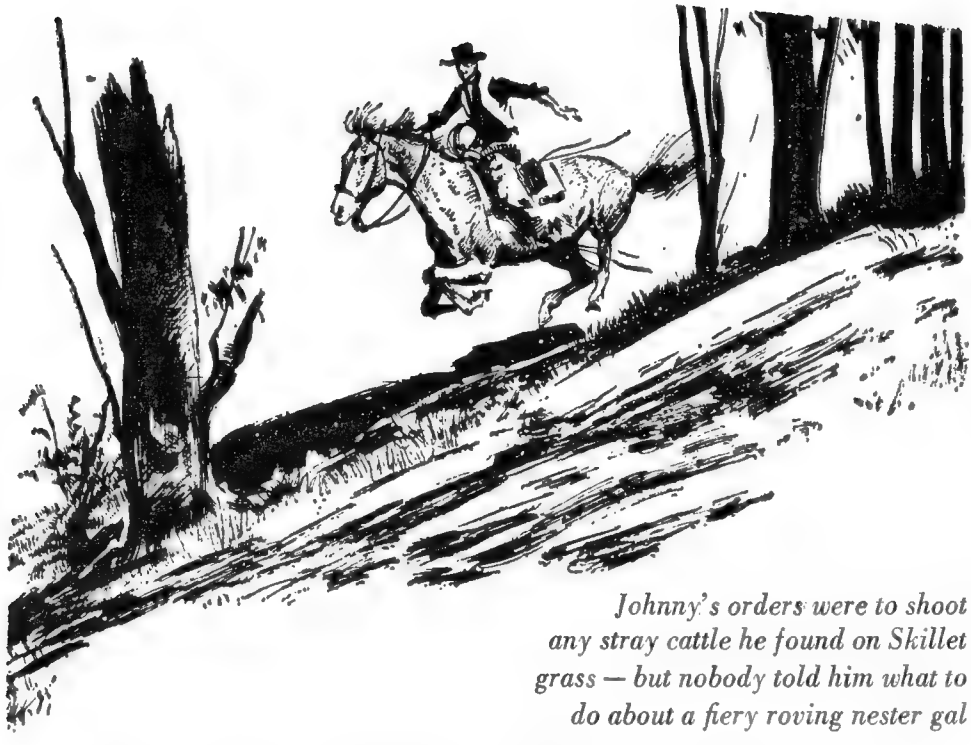
Knowing the breed, the new manager took no offense at his failure to get an immediate answer. Nearly two hours later, as they paused to breathe their horses on a steep mesa climb, Bill turned briefly in his saddle.

"91," he said, and resumed his silence.

——*Sam Brant*

DRY SUMMER

BY GIFF CHESHIRE



Johnny's orders were to shoot any stray cattle he found on Skillet grass — but nobody told him what to do about a fiery roving nester gal

IT WAS a bright, hot morning when Johnny Parminter rode out on his new job. Forward, under the brassy sun, was the haystack butte and its single pine tree that marked the start of his day's riding along Skillet's south boundary line. Trigger Mullen, the hard-eyed owner of the outfit, had pointed out the landmarks all along its course. At half a dozen points, between the pine butte and the point of rocks on the southeast corner of the spread, Johnny had seen the signs Skillet had stuck up the day before:

WARNING

ANY STRAYS FOUND NORTH
OF THIS LINE WILL BE SHOT.

That was all Johnny had to do, ride the section from morning to night and shoot any critter he found on Skillet's side that didn't wear its brand. He hoped he didn't find any. He was a crack shot, but didn't like the idea of proving it on thirsty cattle. Just the same, he'd been a puncher all his working life. When he took on a job he did it.

He skirted the east end of the butte, which was burned a dead yellow by the dry heat, then cut to the left, beginning to feel uneasy. It was at this point, yesterday, that Mullen had given him his first good look at the job he had been hired to do. A restless and pushing man, Mullen had made a contemptuous motion of his hand toward the sage plateau that rolled south through the dancing heat.

"It's the way it always is, Parminter," he'd said bitterly. "A dozen nester outfits are sticking on Skillet's side like ticks. There's no year-round water in that whole section. When a dry year like this comes, their cheap wells

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run dry. So their stock drifts across Skillet to Pumpkin Creek. Those shiftless sons rely on it—or did. This time I'm putting a stop to it."

Johnny had nodded, a lean brown man whose boyish face belied his experience. Being a top hand, he had always ridden for the big outfits, and there had always been a rash of freeloading greasy sackers somewhere around. They filched water and grass and rustled beef. In time they could bleed a big ranch white.

"Do they know about the signs you posted?" he asked.

"They ought to," Mullen said roughly. "I sent word around, too. I aim to show 'em from the start that I mean business." He looked at Johnny, searching his amiable face. "If we don't see eye to eye on it, Parminter, now's the time to find out."

"I don't try to run the outfit I work for," Johnny returned, so sharply that Mullen widened his eyes.

"So I figured when I hired you," the rancher grunted. He seemed satisfied with that reply.

Now, setting out along the line at a gait slow enough to let him watch for cow tracks, Johnny wished he'd been able to find some other kind of job. But he hadn't found one in weeks of drifting, working north from the Tonto, and he'd grown tired of being hungry. This job was worth having, and he'd meant what he told Mullen. The outfit he rode for would get his loyalty, even if he had to plug some steers whose tongues were turning black and thick from thirst. He was built that way.

Ten minutes of riding, the sun bright in his level gray eyes, showed Johnny his first evidence that Mullen's warning had taken effect. Off to the right, a rider was shoving a cut of strays to the south, getting it back from the deadline. It dawned on Johnny for the first time what a job Mullen had set up for the nester outfits.

There being no fence, they would all have to ride the line themselves to make sure they didn't lose stuff to Skillet head. That would keep them humping, if they were also pumping water out of failing, hand-dug wells. Naturally sympathetic, Johnny could appreciate what that meant.

But they had asked for it, after all, setting themselves up on the edge of a big outfit and figuring to use its facilities when their own failed them. Skillet controlled the full length of Pumpkin Creek, as the big set-ups often did. They were the ones, generally, that pioneered a new range, and they tried to corner the water. They did that to discourage the shoestringers from coming in; and the sodbusters were even more of a nuisance. He would want to protect himself the same way if he ever owned a spread, even if it was his instinct to be neighborly.

The nester and his little cut were soon lost in the heat haze that thickened in the rolling distance. Johnny's horse poked on. No strays had crossed the deadline so far to fill up on Skillet grass while crossing to Skillet water.

He passed the next landmark, a grove of stunted juniper that reassured him he was still following the line. The next heading was a rock cliff rising up from some old fault, as yet so far away he saw it only as an indistinct blob in the heat. So far, so good, but he still didn't feel easy.

He had passed the rock cliff when suddenly his lean, pliant body stiffened. Cow tracks in considerable numbers stitched themselves from right to left across the line, going onto Skillet. Pulling down on his horse, Johnny reached for tobacco, his eyes intent and hard, their grayness darkening. Strays didn't travel in compact bunches and, as he expected, he soon detected the hoof prints of a horse. He was instantly aggressive.

FAR to his left he could see the vague line of trees that marked the course of Pumpkin Creek.

He had a peculiar, empty feeling as he stared at it. In spite of Mullen's flat orders, he knew what he would have done, except for that rider with the trespassing cattle. The first time, just once, he would have thrown the streers back and tried to get word to whoever owned them that it was the last time. But this bunch had been driven to the creek, and was there now under guard.

But he had heard his orders, and understood them, and there were no two ways about it. This was open defiance. Like it or not, Johnny had some steers to shoot, and he aimed to get it accomplished.

His stomach felt full of cold tallow as he sent his horse sloping toward the creek. The trees, which looked compact from the distance, began to space out, but the creek banks hid the steers from sight. The shape he saw, presently, was that of the horse and rider who were with them. The horse had been swung around to face him, the rider was a small shape in the saddle.

Johnny expected to be shot at as he stormed on in. Nothing like that happened. The rider, a girl, was staring at him with cold, warning eyes. She held a peashooter gun he had not seen until he rode up. It was pointed at the belt buckle on his lean middle. Small as it was, he felt something less than comfortable.

"Well?" she said, when he failed to speak. The voice was steady, low-pitched, and might under other circumstances have sounded pleasant.

Her steers, probably fifty head, wore R Bars on their sides, which told him plenty. Mullen had mentioned a Pike Rance and his hotheaded daughter Rita. Pike ran the nester settlement, held it together, did its talking and, apparently, made most of its decisions. If you trim his wick for him, Mullen had said, the rest'll quit bleeding me. Don't miss the chance, Parminter.

This was the chance, yet for the moment Johnny had no idea what to do about it. But a temper that was never slow to get going rushed him on anyway.

"This," he said, "is about the brassiest thing I ever saw in my life."

"We live and learn," Rita Rance said bitterly. "At least some people do. Who're you? I figured Trigger Mullen would be along this morning, hunting a chance to live up to that nickname he's so proud of."

The R Bar steers had satisfied their thirst and had lifted their dripping muzzles from the creek. Johnny stared at them, growing hotter and less uncertain with each breath.

"I'm Skillet's new line rider," he barked, "and I reckon you know what my orders are."

"About shooting strays? But these aren't strays. I brought them here under close herd."

"You can split hairs very nicely, Rita Rance," he blazed, "but that doesn't change a thing. You've breached the line after a fair warning."

"Then why don't you shoot them?" Neither her eyes nor the gun she held had moved once in all that time.

Johnny got a deep insight now into what Mullen had said about the Rance leadership. This reply to the warnings had the kind of insolence that could swing the whole nester colony behind it. Skillet was going to be laughed at, the way Johnny had a feeling he was being laughed at by this girl right now.

He was thinking fast. Except for those cool, stubborn eyes, Rita looked as if a breath would blow her out of the saddle. Her hair was reddish, her shoulders small but taut above a well-developed chest. She wore a split skirt, faded and a little short. She was woman enough to be aware of his slow inventory and, for an instant, self-conscious.

He used that distraction gainfully, whipping off his hat and throwing it into her face. His horse was his own, well-trained, and it drove forward at his signal. Johnny pulled her out of

the saddle and fell with her to the ground. The gun exploded, but that was accidental. He staggered to his feet, gasping, the breath knocked out of him. The horses whirled away. Rita lay still on the ground.

He had reached for his gun, meaning in that rush of anger to carry out his orders. Then he swung back and stared at her again. She wasn't fooling; she had been hurt in the collision and fall. For the first time he remembered that he weighed a hundred sixty pounds.

Worry whipped up in him as he hunkered down and put his hand on her shoulder. It was soft and warm, and he saw the slow rise and fall of her breast. Then he noticed that her right arm was pinned under her. She groaned and then her eyes opened and she looked up at him. The eyes showed, for the first time, a trace of fear. That got through to him.

He said, "You made me do it."

"Why aren't you shooting the steers?"

"Your arm—you're hurt!"

She sat up, groggy but still sufficiently sensitive to wince. One glance showed Johnny that what he had feared was true. The arm had a queer bend, halfway to the elbow. It was broken. He'd done that to her, and he was weak with guilt and worry. The arm hadn't started to hurt yet, but she cradled it as she sat rocking, looking up at him.

DECISION came instantly. He said gently, "I'll catch the cayuses and get you home. Believe me, I never intended—"

"Usually you're not so rough when you attack a woman?" she broke in.

He seemed to have lead in his chin, and his mouth hung open as he swung away. His horse had come to a stop off in the hot distance and was nibbling the dry grass. He walked up to it easily, mounted, and soon had her R Bar animal in tow. When he had ridden back to her, he dismounted, pulled off his shirt, and ripped it up to make a sling for her arm. He was as easy as he could be with it, but the arm must be hurting her now. Yet she didn't wince.

"The—the steers?" she said finally.

"I'll shag em home—this once."

She tried to disdain his help, but finally had to yield and let him give her a hand up. She was white-cheeked, and unsteady in the saddle, and he guessed that by now her arm was thawing out plenty. He swung swiftly to leather, rounded in the R Bar steers, and crowded them toward the boundary line.

Southward the sage plateau flattened into a wheeling prairie of more sage and rabbit brush and a starvation stand of dried-up bunchgrass, at which the R Bars tried to nibble as he hazed them on. In the far forward distance, presently, he could see a vague, heat-dissolved stand of cottonwood. When he began to discern the sorry layout there, he knew it was R Bar headquarters. As they rode closer to the place, he realized there was nobody home. That worried him plenty.

"Where's your father?" he demanded.

"In town. He stayed overnight. But he ought to be back pretty soon." There was a notable paleness under the tan of her cheeks, but she still wasn't complaining.

"So that's it," Johnny said, less harshly. "I wondered what kind of man would send a girl on a job like that. Was twisting Mullen's tail your own idea?"

"Our well's dry—and he knew it when he sent his men around with the warning."

"Doesn't your father know about the deadline?" Johnny asked.

"Not yet."

"What'll he do?"

She raked his long lean body with a bitter look. "He'll have trouble with Trigger Mullen. That, if you need to be told, is what Trigger wants. He's tried before to heckle Dad into a gun-

fight. He thinks that if he can kill Dad he can take over the nester range."

"You think," Johnny said hotly, "any rancher who objects to nesters is a range hog."

"I wouldn't know about that," she snapped, "but Trigger Mullen sure is one. Or why'd he hire a gunman?"

"I'm a gunman?" Johnny gasped.

"Do you have a nicer name for it?"

"I'm a line rider," he rapped, "and not so big in my britches I try to run my outfit."

"Just big enough to maul a woman."

Except for her broken arm, he could have tied into her again.

When they reached the house, Johnny helped her down from the saddle, wondering what he would do next. He had already been away from his job too long; but she needed a doctor. He couldn't go to town for one, nor wait till her father got home. He couldn't even spare time to ride to the nearest neighbor, wherever that might be. Mad as he was, he was concerned for her, and not all because he felt guilty.

As if reading his mind, she said, "You can go now. I'll be all right." And then her eyes closed and she started to tumble.

He caught her before she had fallen to the ground. Sweeping her into his arms, he was surprised at how light she was. She felt warm and soft, and he could smell the clean fragrance of her hair when her hat fell off. He carried her into the house, which was hardly more than a tarpaper shack, and placed her gently on an old horsehair couch in there. His pulses began to run wild. He must have been holding this girl too often, and the effect was devastating.

He went for water. She hadn't lied; the well in the back yard was dry. There was a bucket in the kitchen, half full, and he guessed that it had been carried here from someplace else. He wet his handkerchief, squeezed it, and, returning, laid it on her eyes. And then a horse whipped up outside. Johnny turned to stare out the door.

HE KNEW, from the close resemblance to Rita, that the rider was Pike Rance. The man was eying the strange horse in the yard, which did not wear the Skillet brand. Then he came down from the saddle and swung toward the door. He stared at his daughter, flat and motionless on the couch, as he came in. Then his gaze knifed to the tall and shirtless man who bent over her, and his hand stabbed for the grips of his sixgun.

"Take it easy, Pike," Johnny said dryly. "She got a busted arm and fainted, that's all. I used my shirt for a sling."

"Who're you?" the nester asked.

"They call me Parminter. I'm a new rider for Skillet."

"Skillet!" Pike exploded.

Johnny didn't blame the man for being excited. But, before he could say more, Rita gave another moan and opened her eyes.

Pike growled, "It's all right, honey. Mort Sands told me about Mullen's latest caper when I came past his place. What happened to you?"

"Patsy stepped in a gopher hole," Rita said faintly. "It didn't hurt her, but I took a spill."

Johnny knew he must have looked as surprised as did Rance, who seemed startled at the thought of her quitting leather involuntarily. Yet Johnny saw why she had fibbed. Pike would go on the war path immediately at the thought of her being manhandled, especially by a Skillet rider.

"Well, I'm obliged to you for helping her, Parminter," Pike said grudgingly.

Clearly he hated to be indebted to a Skillet puncher. Although Johnny had meant to deliver a sharp warning about the deadline, he welcomed the chance to leave.

He said, "I hope you mend very

fast, ma'am," nodded coolly to Pike, and then headed out.

He let his horse travel, and was soon back on the Skillet boundary. He hadn't obeyed his orders, but that wasn't why he felt no pride in himself. Solid and scowling in the saddle, he rode on to the point of rocks that marked the end of his patrol.

He found no more sign of strays having crossed toward Pumpkin Creek, or of having been escorted there, either. But twice he saw riders to the south of him, moving their stuff back. They didn't seem like a very warlike crowd. Yet, if Pike and Rita were examples, they wouldn't stand being pushed very long, either. He had trouble staying hostile toward them.

He spent a hot, worried day on the line. When he rode in to Skillet headquarters, it was to find Trigger Mullen waiting with considerable curiosity. Johnny was sunburned from going most of the day without a shirt. He still didn't feel like the biggest rooster in the country just because he had gotten the better of Rita Rance.

He wished she hadn't lied to save him from her father's anger. That was the thing that got under his skin. If she'd urged her father to give him trouble, he would have felt better. Then he could have kept his temper working against them, instead of feeling this deep, unfathomable uneasiness.

"Did you have trouble?" Mullen asked, even before Johnny had swung down at the horse corral.

Johnny had never lied very well; he just didn't like to do it. But he had a notion Rita wouldn't stretch the truth herself, ordinarily. So he shook his head.

"Never had to explode a cap," he said.

"Then what happened to your shirt?"

"A girl got thrown from her horse," Johnny said. "She stepped in a gopher hole. She broke her arm, and I had to make a sling."

"What girl?"

Johnny looked him square in the eye. "She turned out to be Rita Rance." Abruptly he changed the subject. "Who's going to night ride?" His gray eyes discouraged probing, putting up their own trespass notices.

"Shorty."

Trigger Mullen seemed puzzled and maybe disappointed that there had been no strays to shoot, but something decided him not to press. He swung away, and Johnny finished unsaddling his horse.

He hadn't had time to get acquainted with the Skillet punchers, but they looked like a normal crew, some tough and truculent, some otherwise, but all good riders. They'd attend to business, the same as he did. Yet he couldn't help wonder what Shorty would have done had he come upon Rita and those R Bars pilfering water at Pumpkin Creek.

Johnny had a reason for this curiosity. If other nesters breached the deadline deliberately, they'd be apt to do it at night. That was why Mullen had put one of his older hands on the night shift. So it was probably that Shorty would go in shooting if he saw signs of anything like that. The thought disturbed him.

He didn't sleep very well that night. It wasn't the snoring, although the bunkhouse was full of it, nor the heat that lingered from the day, that kept his long body tossing and twisting. Once when he did drift off it was to dream that he was lost on the Gila desert, with thirst burning in his throat. Every time he got close to water a man on a horse would drive him back.

WHEN he woke up at daylight he knew it was one day when he would hate to throw on the leather and cinch it up. There was excitement at the corral when he came out of the bunkhouse to wash. A runty-looking puncher was the center of attention.

Mullen was saying, "You did, Shorty? How many?"

"Six," Shorty said. He didn't look very happy.

"R Bars?" Mullen prodded.

Shorty shook his head. "No, some of Limpy Harris's stuff. Blast it, Trigger, those nesters couldn't run us short enough of water to hurt."

"That's not the point," Mullen said. "I aim to get rid of the whole pack, and this is the time to do it. What's the matter Shorty, you got a weak stomach?"

"I don't like shooting a cripple's steers just because they're thirsty."

"You want another job?" There was a warning in the rancher's voice."

"If you don't mind."

"All right," Mullen said hotly, "but it won't be on this spread. Anybody else who feels chicken-hearted can pull his freight, too."

Nobody else seemed to feel that way, even if Shorty did. Shorty shrugged, but Johnny had a hunch the man was relieved as he walked toward the bunkhouse. Johnny didn't look at him when he passed. The tallow was back in his stomach, gagging him.

He had a bad moment as he combed his brown, unruly hair. Then he ate his breakfast, saddled up, and rode out to the south line. He jaw was tight.

Early as it was, the day was already hot. The seared grass on the butte seemed about to explode into fire. There wasn't a trace of a cloud or a stir of wind, and the dead air seemed already to smell of carrion. He had been born and raised in hot country. He knew how important water was to every living creature, how quickly flesh or fiber burned itself up without it. He kept recalling that dream of his, and how thick and choking his tongue had felt. And he kept remembering that the well on R Bar had run dry, that they were even short of water at the house.

He almost turned back for headquarters to tell Mullen he'd help Shorty pull his freight and gladly. But he had hired out for the job knowing what it was to be, even if not what it was like. He tightened his jaw muscles stubbornly and rode on through the hot day.

He sat his saddle in the same dogged patience as the day before, seeing no cattle sign on the line to disturb him, and nothing right or left to remind of the sudden tension Mullen's stand had created. Then, east of the juniper grove, he pulled down his horse suddenly and sat staring.

This time it was not the tracks of cattle but those of horses, four of them, that he studied. They came from the nester side, crossed over, and went on across Skillet grass. The creek, at this point, could not be seen because of the ground swells. He swung his horse promptly onto this new sign and began to follow it.

When he topped the first rise, he grew tighter in his seat, lifting himself a little in the stirrups. He saw below him four dismounted men bent over shapes he knew at once to be dead cattle. They must be the ones Shorty had shot. The men were skinning out the carcasses.

He saw no reason why they shouldn't do that, but realized at once that they had been keeping close watch on the country roundabout. One by one they straightened to stare at him, and he knew that he could not back water after that. He rode on, neither fast nor slow, and his features were expressionless as he came up to them.

Every man there had a hand close to the grips of his gun. They were a ragged lot, burned a deep brown by the weather they were exposed to the year around, whiskery, haggard and, right now, mighty dangerous.

A man said, "Sit tight, man. Nothing this side of hell's going to keep us from skinning out Limpy's steers."

Under other circumstances, the tone of voice would have awakened anger in Johnny Parminter. The way it was, he only felt an unexplainable misery. They figured he had done the shooting.

He said, "The stuff breached the line

after a fair warning. You have no kick coming."

"You've had your look," the man snapped. "Now get riding."

"As long as you're on Skillet grass," Johnny retorted, "I reckon I'll give the orders. Get your hides, then fork your own saddles. Next time watch your stock closer."

He had a chilly feeling between his shoulders. Without its being very apparent, they had begun to spread out a little. Their smouldering eyes told plainly what they would do if they could get hold of him. His tongue pushed hard against the back of his teeth. He dreaded turning his back to them when he left. But he did it, holding his breath until he was back over the rise.

When he rode past the rock cliff, he remembered that this was where the R Bars had crossed the day before. There was no fresh sign, but he stopped his horse, staring southward through the dancing haze of heat. It wasn't much of a ride, and it would be only decent to inquire about Rita'a arm—whether she had gotten it set and if the doctor figured it would knit all right. He swung the mount in that direction.

SHE had seen him coming and was standing in the doorway of the shack when he rode up. The sling made out of his shirt was gone, and the arm was in a plaster cast, resting in a much more professional looking support. If she knew how pretty that touch of helplessness made her look, she might be tempted to wear the sling permanently.

Her eyes were bleak as she said, "I don't suppose you work the clock around, tough as you are."

"I didn't shoot Harris's steers," he retorted, unable to let her think that badly of him. "But if it had been my shift I would have."

"Naturally. Women and cripples are Skillet's specialty. Why did you come here?"

"To ask about your arm," he snapped.

"It hurts like the devil, thanks to you. But the doctor was out, and he set it."

"Look, Rita—"

"Don't Rita me. Don't anything me. Just get out of here."

"It's time," Johnny exploded, "that you started to think a little straighter. You were asking to get hurt, with your cute caper of taking those R Bars to the creek. As for the deadline Mullen's drawn, he was here first."

Her mouth opened, but it was a moment before she spoke. "Is that what you think?" she asked then.

"Wasn't he?" Johnny asked, surprised.

"Skillet was here ahead of us, but Mullen wasn't. This is his first year."

Johnny stared harder. "Did he buy the outfit?"

With a bitter grimace, she said, "Trigger Mullen is the no-good brother of a nice man. He inherited the place when Sam Mullen died. Sam never kicked about our being here; he never refused us water in a drought. You stop that sickening talk about our knowing what we faced when we arrived. We've been here a long while, and were good neighbors of Skillet's till it changed hands."

Johnny swallowed so hard he wondered if she could hear the sound. Mullen hadn't explained that, and Johnny hadn't been on the spread long enough to hear any bunkhouse talk about it.

"Just the same," he said doggedly, "Mullen's got a right to make his own policy."

"Policy?" Rita hooted. "What Mullen's got is a cold-blooded scheme. Skillet's the only thing he ever got honestly in his life, and it came easy. He's after our range. He knows that if he pinches off our water long enough, we'll do something he can use an excuse to clean us out. That'll be any time now. We're pooling well

water, which won't last more than another day or two."

She could be throwing sand in his eyes with those charges against Mullen, hoping Johnny would get sympathetic and let them water at the creek on the quiet. Yet somehow he didn't feel she was doing that, was even capable of it, not after what she'd had the spunk to do yesterday.

"Then there's one way to beat Trigger," he said. "Don't give him an excuse to tie into you."

"You call yourself a cow puncher and you don't know we have to have water?" she cried.

He did, and she had him. It wasn't only a matter of how long cattle could go thirsty. Even more deeply involved was how long the men responsible could stand seeing them dying of thirst when water ran plentifully in Pumpkin Creek. In their place he would have said the hell with any man's deadline.

But Johnny had never betrayed his outfit, and he couldn't budge now. He could only touch his hat and ride off, an indescribable illness someplace deep in his being. It brought unwelcome thoughts into his mind in a persistent stream—the way he could help the nesters through the drought if he could bring himself to be disloyal. For he would have to stay on the payroll to do it. He couldn't just quit and ride off, because Mullen would replace him with a rider he was surer he could trust.

Johnny rode on to the point of rocks without incident, and there ate a cold noon meal out of his saddle pocket. He seated himself in the shade of the rocks for a while, smoking a cigarette, trying to ease his mind of the pressures the last two days had built.

Helping the nesters survive this one drought wouldn't do any good, he realized. Trigger Mullen owned Skillet. If he didn't want nesters around him, he'd keep after them year after year until he got rid of them. Pike Rance should have the sense to know that, and maybe he did have. When he tangled with her at the creek, Johnny remembered, Rita had said that Trigger wanted to heckle Pike into a gunfight.

That made chilling compelling sense to Johnny now. Pike would watch the suffering cattle, the harried nesters, as long as he could stand it. Then he'd decide that the only solution was to bring about another change of ownership on Skillet, hoping for better luck next time.

Johnny wondered just how good Trigger was—if he merited his nickname. As long as he chose to use the name, he probably did. No man in his right mind invited gun trouble unless, at least in his own estimation, he had what it took to win. And that nickname was a standing challenge to gunslicks trying for a reputation.

The return ride to Skillet headquarters was uneventful. The nesters were doing their best to give Mullen no cause for aggressive action against them.

Yet time was running out for them, was bringing the crisis upon them with the speed of an express train.

AGAIN Trigger Mullen was waiting for his line rider to come in and report. "They're staying on their side of the line," Johnny said roughly, "except for four men who crossed on horseback to skin out Harris's dead steers."

"What did you do about that?" Mullen asked.

"Told 'em to go ahead with it."

"I guess that was the best thing," Mullen agreed. "We have to keep our own noses clean."

"For what?" Johnny's voice had turned thin.

Mullen frowned. Softly he said, "Maybe it wasn't so good that you saw Rita Rance. She's as pretty as she is spunky."

"I happen to like both qualities," Johnny said flatly. "Plenty."

Yet he was trying to get a dally on his rising temper. If he were going to help Rita, he would have to do it

through disloyalty and the betrayal of his job. There was no other way to beat Trigger Mullen, short of killing him. Johnny knew that now beyond doubt.

In the same purring way he had addressed Shorty, Mullen said, "Maybe you'd like another job."

"I took a job riding line for you," Johnny snapped, pulling himself taller, "and I'll do it, Mullen. When I feel otherwise, you won't have to fire me. I'll draw my time."

"That's the way I pegged you in the first place," Mullen said, and he seemed to be reassured. He liked fight in a man, all right. He just didn't want independence.

Johnny's relief for that night proved to be a puncher the others called Mississippi. He was lank and dour, clearly the type Mullen could trust to replace the departed Shorty. Johnny watched the man ride out, and frowned slightly.

He didn't sleep any better that night than he had the night before. Thus he was awake when, sometime around midnight, a horse whipped into the yard. A little later he heard men talking excitedly. Then Trigger Mullen stumped into the bunkhouse, his voice bawling out.

"Up, boys! Those sons have played right into our hands. They're bunching their stuff on R Bar. Mississippi thought he saw cattle moving in that direction, and he checked. It means they're going to breach the line in force, and that's just what we want!"

Johnny had sat up in his bunk wide awake. "Why do we want that, Mullen?" he asked, his voice very soft.

"We'll hand 'em the surprise of their mangy lives."

"Not me. Not ever."

"You refusing to obey orders?" Mullen rapped.

"I'm just telling you I disagree with you and I'm going to quit."

"Latch onto him, boys!" Mullen barked. "He'll spill the beans for us. He went soft on that girl!"

Johnny might have made it easier on himself if he had been able to betray his outfit. As it was, he had declared himself now, and he came off the bunk in a driving lunge. He smashed into Mullen and drove him back and down. The men who sprang at him proved that, since Shorty's going, Johnny was the only one unwilling to back Mullen straight down the line. Johnny struck out with his fists, darted, and rammed his way to the bunkhouse door.

But they nailed him there, at least three of them bringing him down with a crash. He only fought harder. Then something rapped hard across the back of his head, and he forgot all about it for a while.

He had that sense of being nearly dead from thirst again, of crawling toward water only to be beaten back. A bright roaring pain in his head went with it; the crash of it was like hoofs driving against his ears. Then his eyes slitted open and he saw the yellow of lamplight. Very vaguely he saw the figure of a man, before his lids clamped tight and the pain jarred through him once more.

But he was thinking, aware already that he was stretched on a bed in Skillet's bunkhouse. He had been left under guard while the outfit thudded away to catch the nesters in a bullet trap. It took effort not to hurl himself off the bunk as he had before. He opened his eyes again and saw that the man was the old ranch cook, who at the moment was not watching him.

Handlebar moustaches, stained with tobacco, drooped down from the cook's weak and surly mouth. Beyond him burned a lantern that sat on a plank table. Then the cook looked at Johnny and stiffened. His hand moved toward the grips of the gun in his lap.

"Take it easy," he warned. "That's all you have to do."

"How long have they been gone?"

"Too long for you to take a hand in it, buck. So just simmer down."

"Then how about a drink of water?"

"No harm in that, I reckon. Stay there, I'll fetch it."

The cook gripped the gun as he rose. His face wore a look of complete indifference. He backed safely out of Johnny's reach before he turned, and he was halfway to the water pail by the door when Johnny's boot, picked off the floor, smashed the lantern.

The brief, guttering light turned into blackness as the shattered lantern hit the floor. With a curse, the cook fired, but Johnny had by then rolled off the bunk. He tossed the other boot to his left. The flaming crash of a gun followed its thud on the floor. The cook meant business. By then Johnny was plunging forward, bent low. His shoulder hit the man, knocking a gust of air from him as they came down in a threshing heap.

Thereafter, Johnny didn't have much trouble. He rose with the gun in his grip and grated, "Easy, old man," but the cook by then was entirely harmless. Within ten minutes, Johnny was dressed, armed, and riding.

As he reached the south boundary line and cut eastward, he was fighting despair and an exploding urgency. There was enough starshine to let him make out the landmarks that had guided his riding for Skillet. At this onrushing gait it was not long before he could see in the far distance the rocky cliff that marked the beginning of R Bar range to the south.

HE PULLED down his horse just once to stop the hoof clatter and listen. He could hear no shooting, and only then began to hope that Rance's nesters had been shrewd enough to keep a watch on Skillet's movements. He left the boundary line then, cutting straight for the R Bar layout.

Beyond the top of land he began to see, well ahead of him, the sooty shapes of concentrated cattle. At that distance he could not estimate the size of the herd. He rode wide of it, knowing that the life of a Skillet puncher wouldn't be worth much, right now, in the hands of the nesters holding it.

The house was dark as he came down upon it. He came in quietly, openly, but even so there was a figure in the doorway as he pulled up. Rita held a gun in her hand, and this time it was a man-sized .45.

"What are you doing here?" she said. Even when tight with tension, her voice was pleasant.

"Is your dad out with the steers, Rita?" he asked, humble now, terribly concerned for her and her neighbors.

"Are you afraid to look?" she taunted. "Do you think I'll make your spying safe and easy?"

He had no resentment of her attitude whatsoever. In rushing urgency, he said, "You've got no reason to trust me, but you have to listen. I quit Skillet tonight, when word came in that you nesters were bunching your stuff. Mullen will be waiting for you to breach the line, with every man he's got except the old cook he left to hold onto me."

"Mullen's—set a trap?" she gasped. "You broke away to tell us?"

"Yes. Your dad and the other nesters wouldn't believe me. But they would believe you."

"How do I know this isn't a trick?" she cried.

"You'll have to find the answer to that in your own mind."

"All right," she said. "I'll tell them."

Johnny swung down and let her take his horse. She was fully dressed, and he knew that the night's pressures had kept a lot of other nester women sleepless too. He watched her ride out toward the thirsty herd, seated on the doorstep and smoking a cigarette. Beneath his surging worries, there was a settled feeling. Presently there were two horses coming in toward the shanty.

Pike Rance had returned with Rita. He swung down at the house step, and for a moment stood there staring down at the seated ex-Skillet puncher. Then

he stepped past Johnny and went into the house. In a moment a lamp came alight in there. "Come on in, Parminter," Pike called.

Johnny stepped indoors and Rita followed. They both stared at his battered face in the lamplight. The satisfaction they showed, Johnny knew, was not vindictive. Rita's eyes had a queer little glint in them.

Pike nodded. "Well, you've sure been worked over. We're much obliged, Parminter, though I still don't know why you cared."

"I call myself a cow puncher," Johnny returned, looking again at Rita, reminding her of the taunt she had given him.

"I reckon you are one," said Pike. "But even if Skillet's laying for us, that herd's got to have water. One more hot day and the steers'll be dropping like flies. I reckon you knew that."

"I sort of had an idea."

"Do you have any other ideas?"

"Well," said Johnny, "I kind of figured you had one. You knew it'd be hard to bunch that stuff here without Skillet's catching on. On top of that, you'd have had somebody watching their movements."

"All right," Pike said, and for the first time his worried eyes showed a hint of friendliness. "Rita thinks you're on the square, Parminter, so I'm going to trust you. Skillet did what we hoped they would, and we can use your help."

"How?" Johnny said promptly.

"There's a bigger cut of dry steers down at the point of rocks. We weren't sure Mullen had really taken the bait till you said so. Who's night riding for him?"

"A bugger they call Mississippi."

"That skunk. Is he with the outfit or still on the line?"

"I don't know."

"He know you kicked over the traces?" Pike asked.

"I don't think so," Johnny said. "He came in with word, and I think Mullen sent him right back out."

"Well, you know the Skillet line," Pike said. "We hoped his seeing us move some steers'd keep him away from the point of rocks. But Trigger Mullen's forgotten more tricks than we ever knew. He might have wondered if we were running a sandy. We'd be obliged if you'd keep Mississippi away from the point of rocks. Or, if he's already been there and caught on, keep him from getting word back to Mullen."

"I'll get at it," Johnny said instantly. Yet he stared a moment longer at Pike Rance. "So it's only your own stuff you've been shuttling around up here for them to see."

PIKE only grunted, and Johnny went out to his horse. Trigger Mullen had called Pike a mangy, blood-sucking nester. But Pike wasn't watering his own steers, had no chance of doing so. He had sacrificed them in the hope of getting the other nesters out of their trouble. Johnny's eyes grew solemn as he rode out from R Bar.

He came onto the boundary line a little east of the rock bluff where Mullen expected the herd to try to cross to Pumpkin Creek. Northward the night hid him from the trees of the stream, where Skillet's tough hands lay in waiting for the harassed nesters. A cold yet consuming excitement rose in him. There was only one thing wrong with Pike's plans. The man's own steers had to have water, and they were going to get it if Johnny Parminter had any say in the matter.

As he turned eastward along the line, he had the sharpest memory of Rita the day she had watered the R Bars. He knew now where that cool, daring defiance came from, whence came, also, the generosity that had kept her from telling Pike just how she broke her arm. He knew he could ride to the ends of the earth without encountering their likes again.

He kept a close watch on the country ahead, not only along the line but northward toward the creek. If Missis-

sippi had discovered the full extent of the nesters' plan, he would probably be too crafty to follow the line in trying to get back to the Skillet outfit. Yet Johnny came upon the night rider so quickly and openly that for a moment he sat tight in the saddle, his hand on his gun, his blood crashing in his ears.

Mississippi came along the line at a sloping gallop. He pulled up his horse for an instant but, when Johnny waved his hat reassuringly over his head, came on. Johnny had his horse swung so that his hidden hand could be kept on his gun.

"It's you, Parminter?" Mississippi said in excitement. "Where are the rest of the boys?"

Johnny felt weak as he realized the man did not know of his turning on Skillet. "Back yonder," he said. "What's wrong?"

"Those nesters have run the biggest kind of a whizzer."

"Yeah," Johnny cut in impatiently. "Trigger guessed they might. Where do they have the rest of their steers?"

"Down by the point of rocks."

"Fine," Johnny said. "That's why he sent me to meet you. They have us spread, so he figures its best not to jump 'em. That's let 'em get across with the bunch they have on R Bar. He wants you to go back and watch. Try to identify the men who take the stuff across the line. You know 'em and I don't. It's grounds to get tough with 'em, and thats' all Triggers' after."

For a moment he had trouble pulling in a quiet breath. He sat ready to jump Mississippi if the man showed any sign of suspicion.

"Well, it's his water," Mississippi said finally, and swung his horse around.

Johnny waited there a moment longer, debating the wisdom of letting the man run loose. Yet taking an armed man off a horse was no easy matter, and they were so close to the hiding Skillet outfit that a slip-up could be disastrous to the nesters. It was safer to have Mississippi back at the point of rocks, not interfering and thinking that was what he was supposed to do.

His mind settled on that point, Johnny began to wonder what his own best move would be now. It was then that the idea came, sharp and compelling. Down at the point of rocks, the greater part of the nester herd was going to fill up on water. Yet a dav or two of burning heat would cancel that small relief. There was only one real and final solution. There would never be any other.

When he had used the last of his resources, Pike Rance would do that one thing. The way he had used his own steers to benefit his neighbors proved it. He would do the thing Trigger Mullen seemed to want the most—he would brace Trigger, trying to settle the problem permanently. Pike was far from a young man now. His reactions would be slower than Mullen's, his eyesight less sharp, no matter what his courage.

Therefore, Johnny concluded as he started his horse, there was no use stretching out the suffering of the cattle and the terrible tensions in those who were responsible for their welfare.

He judged that he had about two hours of darkness left. He headed straight for Pumpkin Creek, crossed it, and then turned west. Within fifteen minutes he saw the first bunch of bedded Skillet steers. He hazed them quietly to their feet and got them moving. He was by then well west of the place where the outfit waited to jump the nesters.

He was driving about fifteen head of cattle when he again crossed the creek. He plunged directly southward until he was well over on the nester side of the line. Then he began to bend back in, hazing the unwilling cattle on a parallel to the line. But he stayed close enough to the boundary not to mix with the nester stuff, or for them to get wind of what he was doing.

WHEN he came past the rock cliff he could feel a nervous flutter in the beat of his heart. Night still lay thick about him, but the fading stars warned that the first fingers of dawn would soon reach over the sageland. He lifted the speed of the steers to a trot, heading them straight for Pumpkin Creek.

A band of steel seemed to be clamped about his chest as he followed, but he didn't pull down his horse until he heard the sharp crack of a rifle shot. That was followed by an excited yell, then other yells and a sudden, rattling volley of shooting.

Horses whipped out of the trees by the creek, the riders firing furiously. The herd had already spooked, charging off in all directions, some of them dropping. Then a man's astonished outcry cut through the racket. The rider had stopped by a dropped steer, and had swung down and struck a match, somehow made suspicious.

"Trigger, these are Skillet cattle!" he shouted.

"Compliments of Johnny Parminter!" Johnny bawled at them. That was good enough, for he held no grudge against the Skillet cattle.

He cut straight for the boundary line and R Bar range. Again the rifles started crackling, but now he was their target. Horses thundered behind, but they wheeled off at the line. Johnny kept riding, his breathing still slow and shallow. He was gambling his life on Trigger's fearing to follow him into the nester domain, where a dose of his own medicine might lay in wait for him.

He stopped on top of the rise to make sure they had turned back. Then he observed the grayness in the eastern sky that soon would show Mullen the full fruits of his ambush. He lined out for Skillet headquarters.

The old cook was starting breakfast. He whirled from the big stove to stare at the man who came in. "Now, you look here!" he blazed. "I have nothing against you personally, Parminter. I was only doing what I was told to do!"

"Take it easy," Johnny advised. "I figured as much. You can square it with some coffee and a stack of saddle blankets."

He was smoking a cigarette on the bunkhouse steps when, half an hour after daybreak, the Skillet crew came riding in. Trigger Mullen was in the lead, and they all pulled straight in the leather when they recognized the man who watched them casually. Mullen rode over, his eyes blazing, but the others held back a little.

"What in blue blazes are you doing here?" Mullen breathed.

"You never paid me off," Johnny said.

The bewilderment on Mullen's face made it loose, almost weak. Johnny eyed him idly, knowing the man was trying to figure out whether Johnny had helped the nesters play their trick.

"What's the matter?" Johnny asked, when the man continued to stare at him. "I have pay coming, so I waited."

But Mullen wasn't going to explain how he had shot up his own steers. His punchers were regarding Johnny suspiciously, and here and there a hard mouth was haunted by the ghost of a grin. Johnny figured he knew them about as well as he knew himself. Like him, they were loyal to their outfits and they'd been less troubled by conscience that he. He had been thinking hard about what commanded the loyalty of men like these.

Before Mullen got his puzzle unscrambled, Mississippi rode in. The scene he saw in the ranchyard struck him as in no way unusual. He rode up to Trigger Mullen.

"Well, they did it," he reported.

Trigger stared at him. "Did what?"

"Watered about nine-tenths of the nester herd down by the point of rocks."

"And you let 'em?" Mullen bawled.

"Sure. Isn't that what you wanted?"

Mullen could only sit his saddle and look at the man.

Puzzled, Mississippi said, "I did exactly what Parminter said."

"Ah," Mullen breathed, and his hot glare swung back to Johnny.

It was too late. Somewhere a laugh came from one of his punchers.

Mullen's face reddened. He knew what Johnny realized. He couldn't run Skillet the way he intended to without the support of these riders. He could not command support without their respect. Johnny came to his feet as Mullen swung out of the saddle. Here and there a man who had been grinning a little stiffened his face. They began to edge off.

FOR the space of another breath, Mullen hung in indecision. He seemed to suspect that he was being caught in something without a trace of humor in it. He had set out to bait Pike Rance into a gun trap, and now he faced one himself. His men knew that even better than he did.

Then his features firmed, going hard and determined. He was suspicious, reluctant to let himself be diverted from his main objective, but he knew what he had to do.

"All right, buck," he said, in a soft, dead voice. "I'll pay you off."

Johnny had known it was too much to hope that Mullen would backtrack and lose control of his crew. But he was also thinking of Pike Rance, and even more of Rita. He was still completely settled in his mind.

"Your move, Trigger," he said, just as softly.

Trigger Mullen's body stiffened as his hand stabbed down. He was bent slightly at the waist. His eyes glinted. Johnny's thumb and hand arm seemed to have been born for what they were doing. He felt the jar of his gun just as something hot and whining nicked his ear. He watched Mullen's twisting figure begin to bend. The man's smoking gun tipped downward, then fell from an opening hand. Mullen gulped just once, then went down in a limp heap.

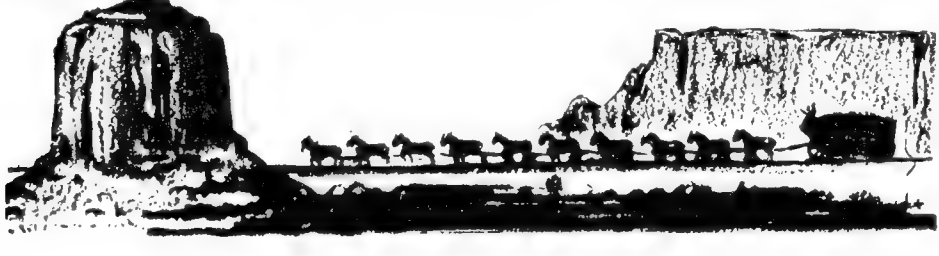
Almost lazily, Johnny slid his glance around the yard. The gun he held was all too ready to bark again, and every watching puncher knew it. There was respect on their faces, the feeling Mullen had tried for and failed to win.

"He didn't have what it takes to run the outfits, boys," Johnny said mildly. "Sam Mullen did have, and there must be an heir like him somewhere along the line. Just you treat the nesters the way Sam did, till you find out. Because I aim to be there with 'em for a spell—maybe a long one, if I'm as lucky as I hope to be."

The rider who had been the first to laugh was the first to speak. He said, "Holster the gun, Parminter. Nobody's going to take it up for Trigger Mullen—not if there is a hope of there being a Mullen around who's more like Sam."

This time Johnny didn't mind turning his back on them as he rode out for R Bar. He hadn't won their loyalty, but he had their admiration. Meanwhile Pike's steers hadn't been in on that watering at the point of rocks. Johnny let his horse line out.

A girl with her arm in a sling would decide how long he stuck around, after the R Bars were watered. Somehow he felt it would be a long, long time.



BLOODY BUTTE

BY W. J. REYNOLDS

BEN FRANKLIN stood halfway up the rugged side of the narrow canyon, at the base of the impassable bluff. The blackened barrel of his rifle slanted downward through a crack in the chunk of rock. Several yards below him, his bay gelding stood motionless behind another huge upright slab with Ben's brush jacket secured over its head. Ben had been there for two hours. Pig Huey would have to pass below; there was no other way, unless he gave up the chase.

Ben had not seen his pursuers, but in the last day and a half he had made his deductions. It had to be Huey. Other than a stray Apache, no one else could unravel his trail that fast. And most of the bronco Apaches were already denned up in Mexico.

That was Ben's mission, to set up a meeting between Colonel Hager and the Mexican Rurales commander. The colonel intended to go into Mexico and clean out the Apaches in their winter rancheria. Even though the Mexicans stood to gain as much as the Ameri-

Above them was the burning sky, below them a band of merciless killers

cans, it could mean a court martial for the colonel if anything went wrong. On the other hand, if the raid were a success the colonel would undoubtedly come out of it a general officer.

It had to be Pig Huey and his gang of murderers, Ben thought. The ex-scalp hunters didn't want peace on the frontier. They wanted the Apaches raiding. Gun running was a lucrative business, and the Indian raids covered their own depredations. With unshod ponies, moccasin tracks, arrows, and Apaches' gear—and no survivors—who could tell it wasn't Apaches? They were living fat on things as they were. They had somehow found out that Colonel Hager had sent for Ben Franklin, and that, with the colonel's reputation as a tough fighter, had been enough for them to suspect Ben's mission.

Ben shifted a little to ease cramped muscles. "Come on, you murdering little weasel," he muttered. "You got no choice."

Ben's lips cracked in a mirthless grin. Huey was likely in a real stew about now. The little murderer was wary of this canyon and an ambush, but he would have to risk it sooner or later. Ben's track led straight down the canyon and Pig would not be able to tell he had turned off until too late.

Huey might wait a couple of more hours though, until dark, but he would have to risk losing Ben if he did. At the Forks ahead Ben had three different directions from which to pick. In the dark Pig would not know which one. No, Pig had to risk coming on in daylight.

Ben tensed as a flicker of movement caught his eye. He didn't move his head, only his eyes, as he waited. It was five minutes before he caught another movement. Then, as suddenly as an Apache, there was Pig Huey. On foot. Lean, almost frail appearing, in Apache desert moccasins. Ben couldn't see his features but he knew that the flat, turned-up nose that gave him the name of Pig, because of the resemblance, would be quivering with the smell of danger. As suddenly as he had appeared, Pig was gone again.

Ben didn't move. The slightest movement would betray him, and Pig could move like a weasel. He had to wait for a clear shot, for he'd have to get Pig on the move.

Pig was halfway down the canyon when the horseman appeared. Ben recognized the hulking Butcher Gannon. Gannon was leading Pig's horse. Ben got his chance at Pig when Gannon started walking the horse after Pig. Pig's fury at his moronic partner gave him that chance.

Pig appeared in sight, glared back toward Gannon. Ben's rifle snugged his shoulder; but in the same instant Pig caught the movement and ran for cover.

Ben fired and Pig staggered, and Ben's second shot howled off the canyon floor. There'd been nothing to shoot at. Ben caught one more movement of Pig's, farther down the canyon, and sent a shot at it with little hope of hitting anything. But at least Pig wasn't trying to come back.

One bullet shrieked off the boulder near Ben, then another. He ducked, then turned his attention to Gannon. The big, moronic scalper's pea-sized brain had begun to work and he was wheeling his horse to flee when Ben knocked him out of the saddle with two bullets.

One or two more, Ben thought; there'd been too much dust for just two horses. If he moved fast, before that other man or two knew which way the fight had gone....

Ben left his cover, plunging silently down the canyon side. Once on the more open canyon floor, Ben ran hard. Back there about four hundred yards, where the canyon made a slight bend, was a small cove and a clear space. The others would probably be there. His own moccasined feet made no sound as he ran, and he barely glanced at the dead ex-scalper as he went past.

BEN covered the last hundred yards to the spot he had in mind with the same kind of silence and skill as Pig Huey had used entering the canyon. He heard the restless stamp of a horse first and knew he had guessed right.

He approached with more caution than before, glad that the sun was already behind the canyon wall, shadowing the canyon floor. He saw the horses first. One was a pack horse, the other a draft horse, big and clumsy looking, but it had a blanket fastened on its back for a saddle. Then he saw the woman.

Ben lay on the gravelly earth, unmoving except for his eyes, his ears straining. Other than the occasional restless movement of the horses there was no sound. Pig Huey, Gannon and the woman. But Ben waited another fifteen minutes to be sure. He watched the woman with more attention.

She was badly used, exhausted, and her dress—once pretty fashionable—was in rags. Her hair, black and curly, was a tangled mass, dirty and with twigs and grass in it. Her back was against a scrub bush that had the lower branches hacked off; her hands were tied around it. Ben couldn't see her face; her head sagged wearily, hopelessly. He got up and walked forward, his rifle cocked and ready.

She slowly raised her head to look at him, enormous brown eyes in her white face widening in surprise. "Were there any more besides Gannon and Huey?" Ben asked.

She gaped at him, her mouth working soundlessly, a wild hope rising in her face. Ben repeated his question. She shook her head. "N-no, just those two."

Ben laid his rifle down, drew his knife and cut her free. He said, "I'll get my horse. Be back directly." He left at a trot.

Ben got his own horse, stopped and unsaddled and turned Gannon's horse free. Then, leading Huey's claybank, he rode back to the clearing. The girl had repaired her dress as best she could and was wiping her face with a wet rag. A canteen was leaning against her leg.

She stopped and looked at Ben. "You're Ben Franklin, the one they were after?" Her voice, other than a huskiness from lack of water, was pleasant. Her eyes questioned him.

"I'm Franklin. Huey got away, but he was hit. Probably not seriously. Gannon is dead. Huey's ahead now. He probably had a reason, so we'll go back. Likely there is more of his gang ahead."

She nodded. "Yes. I heard them talking. That little animal, he sent a man south three days ago. They were to block a place he called Three Forks."

Ben nodded. "Just ahead, after this canyon. They got wind somehow of my mission."

"I gathered they wanted to kill you to stop you from making some kind of arrangements to raid an Apache. . . rancheria?"

Ben cursed under his breath. Probably the bulk of the gang was down there, eight or ten of them. There was nothing left but to go back, try again.

He looked up at the girl. "Where'd they get you?"

"Off a stage." Her eyes filled with horror, her face twisted. "Those monsters butchered all five passengers except me, shot arrows into the coach and. . .and scalped everybody. One of the passengers was a child!"

"It's one of the reasons they don't want the Indians raids stopped. They loot and murder and blame it on the Apaches." Ben got busy stripping the big stage horse and the pack animal. "You were lucky, ma'am."

Her voice was broken with shame and maybe inner rage. "You. . .think I'm lucky to be. . .ravaged like an animal? Lucky!"

"Better than being dead, ma'am. I'll take you back to the fort."

Ben salvaged food from the pack, lashed it behind his own saddle. He

filled his canteen from the large one on the pack, gave the rest of the water to the horses.

"We'd best be going, ma'am. If those scalpers are at the Forks, we ought to be moving before they get back after us."

She was standing there, stiffly, eyes staring with the horror of the remembered stagecoach. Ben walked up to her, touched her arm. "Ma'am?"

She fell against him with a hoarse cry, was clinging to him with a desperate strength. Ben's arms instinctively went around her; then she was crying. It was more than just crying, it was a too long bottled mixture of horror, shame and degradation, and a terrible hopelessness. She had fallen victime to something too awful for her to conceive from her civilized Eastern upbringing.

She bawled and clutched at him as she emptied herself, her inner defenses released by her rescue. Ben held her and let her cry and made soothing sounds, his own heart aching at the terrible sounds of her weeping.

When she began to quiet a little, Ben salvaged the wet rag and gave it to her. After awhile, when she had wiped at her face again, she said, between hiccups, "I'm sorry, Mr. Franklin. It just came out; I—I couldn't help it. I'm usually not a weeper."

"Good for you, ma'am. Now we'd best get going."

HE HELPED her mount Huey's horse, feeling her shakiness, wanting to speak words of comfort and reassurance but not knowing what to say. She must have been through hell the last few days. First the raid, the butchering and scalping, then the animal conduct of the raiders, the killing distances on horseback, and her unused to riding. She was a devil of a lot of woman to be still alive.

By the time they had cleared the canyon an hour later, Ben knew that he couldn't go much farther. The girl was at the end of her endurance. Her face was dead white, her eyes staring, and she sat the saddle like a dead woman, clinging to the pommel with a last grim strength. She was going on pure determination.

Ben cast a worried glance ahead then at the sun. It would be dark in another hour. He made up his mind. There was a rough, rocky flat ahead, at least a mile across. On the far side was a broken wind-and-storm-eroded butte. They would have to stop there to give the girl some rest. Maybe Huey would think they'd head hellbent back for the border and would give up the chase. At least the scalpers couldn't follow the trail in the dark.

They had barely made the butte when the girl, without a sound, slid limply from the saddle. Ben just had time to grab at her, to break her fall. Half of her ragged dress came off her in his hand. Ben got his own blanket, wrapped her in it and left her.

It took him nearly an hour to get the floundering horses up the open shale slope to a broken but fairly level spot halfway up the butte. He unsaddled, tied the horse and went back, buck jumping, falling and minus considerable skin, to the girl. She hadn't moved a muscle.

He couldn't carry her up; she'd have to help. She didn't respond to his shaking and talking. He slapped her once, then again. She mumbled and whined and he slapped her once more. Her eyes opened, slowly focused. He said, "Come on, ma'am, you've got to help. Get up. You want those scalpers to have you again?"

"Lemmelone!"

Ben slapped her where the blanket was tight, a place that would be sore from riding. "Come on, let's go!"

She came up fighting, spitting, and Ben dodged, grinning a little in spite of his sympathy. She had guts, no doubt about that! He dodged her, and shoved her at the slope, got her moving. She seemed to get the idea then and they labored upward, Ben helping the faltering girl and trying to keep

his own slippery footing. He was wet with sweat, despite the fall coolness, when they eventually made the ledge. The girl collapsed and was asleep again before Ben could get the blanket over her.

It was already dark and soon it would be black dark without a moon. Ben was weary to the bone himself and needed sleep. It would take Huey's gang awhile to ferret them out here. He went to sleep.

He awoke to the soft blowing of his horse, and lay unmoving but for his eyes. He could see the outline of the horses, their ears pointed down slope. One of them blew again, not really alarmed yet. Ben looked at the brilliant stars. The Big Dipper's position told him it was past midnight, maybe two o'clock. Pig Huey had found him.

Ben turned his head to look at the girl. She apparently hadn't moved from where she had collapsed. She breathed deeply, evenly. Ben turned slowly onto his stomach, head beside a boulder, and studied the shale slope in the dim starlight.

It took him several minutes to locate the shape, a third of the way up the slope. He waited, getting a point of reference. It was another ten minutes before the dark shape had moved enough from his reference point for him to be sure. One of them was trying to come up, and he was doing a skillful job of it, too. There was only the faintest of clicks from the shale.

Ben eased his rifle forward. It was too dark to get a sure sight. He fired and, with the crash of the rifle, the man there came up with a hurt shout, went tumbling back down the slope. Ben ducked behind the boulder. Rifles crashed from a semicircle below and bullets shrieked and squalled from rocks around Ben, brought a shower of rotten stone from the cliff at his back.

Then Ben launched himself at the girl as she came up with a startled scream. He bore her down again as more bullets slapped about them.

"Stay down!" he shouted. "It's me, damn it. . . ." He held her by main strength until she suddenly went limp. "It's Pig Huey's gang of murderers, ma'am. They've found us. Stay down."

"A-all right." She was shaking, and her voice was still thin with fear. "It's just that I woke—"

"I know, ma'am. It's all right. They already found us."

"Where are we? The last I remember we were riding. . . ."

Ben explained where they were. He eased off her but she caught his arm, clung to him.

"I'm terribly sorry, Ben. . .Mr. Franklin. I've done it again. You stopped because of me."

"You done the best you could, ma'am. Nobody can do more."

"W-what will we do now?"

"Fight," Ben said. He hoped his voice showed more confidence than he felt.

BARRING the appearance of a troop of cavalry, their position was hopeless. They were in Mexico, in a desolate area policed by a handful of Rurales. They had a very limited supply of water, and this exposed, rocky position could be murder under a hot sun even at this time of year. Pig Huey had only to wait.

The only good thing about this position was the unlikelihood of a rush by Huey's gang. They couldn't climb that shale slope fast; he could pick them off like fish in a barrel. After one try on the chance of catching them in exhausted sleep, they wouldn't try it again. They'd wait.

But with Huey there was no real certainty, so Ben wiggled around so he could watch down the slope. After a moment the girl crawled up beside him.

She was silent for quite a while; then her whisper was strained. "Mr. Franklin. . ."

"Ben."

"Ben. I suppose this is hardly the time for formality. I'm no strategist,

but we're not in an advantageous position, are we?"

"I'm afraid not, ma'am."

"Joyce Vann, Ben. I was on my way to Arizona to teach school. Bringing learning to the frontier, adventure in the Wild West."

"Sometimes adventure is something else once you get aholt of it."

"I got hold of plenty, didn't I?" Her voice held a grim humor.

Ben looked at the dim outline of her face. She had every right to be having vaporing conniption fits, but she was facing up to their dilemma with grim honesty. If he had a chance he could get to like this woman a whole lot.

"Are you a regular scout for the army, Ben?"

"No. I'm a rancher, if you can call a couple of hundred head of cows a ranch. I was with the colonel during the war and scouted for him out here when he was a major. He sort of talked me into this deal because I know the alcalde in San Ramon who is a friend of the Rurale commandant. I also know the Rurale commandant, a Colonel Diaz. I was to set up a meeting for Colonel Hager. He wants to go into Mexico and smash the Apaches in their rancheria this winter."

"Are you married, Ben?"

It took Ben a moment to adjust to this shift in female reasoning; then he grinned. Be dogged! These females never gave up, even when facing death! She got right to the core of things!

"Not so far. You putting in a claim?"

He could more feel than see her grinning back at him. "I just might be, Ben. If you can get us out of this mess alive, I'd be a fool to let you get away, wouldn't I?"

"Maybe a worse one if you latched onto a rough like me."

He felt the change in her even before she spoke. The thinness was back in her voice, the remembering. "I—I guess I wouldn't be much of a catch . . .now. Can you see me being a virtuous teacher after it is common knowledge about. . .those beasts?"

It would be hard on her. There would be gossip even though folks wouldn't mean to be cruel. He said, "Single women don't stay that way out here for long, Joyce. I know men, good men, who would ride two hundred miles for a porch-sitting date with you."

She began to cry, softly, almost inaudibly. He reached over to touch her arm, said gently, "No man who was a man would hold it against you, Joyce, believe me."

"You are a real man, Ben. Would . . .you be willing to marry me?"

"I'd be real proud, Joyce. You're a lot of woman, and don't you believe otherwise for a minute, you hear?"

"Thank you, Ben."

They lay silent for awhile, Ben's eyes searching in a continual sweep of the shale slope. Nothing moved. But deep in boulder-strewn flat hidden by scrub brush, and probably a drywash, was the glow of a small fire, the faint smell of coffee. The raiders were digging in for a stay.

"Ben, what's it like at your ranch?"

"Lonesome," Ben said. "Just me and old Gabe, a stove-up soldier and cowboy. He'll be cook if I ever get some hands. Right now he just watches the lower end of the canyon to keep the stock drifted back. That's the only opening I have to watch. It's a natural stock pasture."

"A house?"

Ben grinned in the darkness. "Two-room cabin, so far. It could be nice. The canyon is a natural windbreak. Snug. Plenty of water and grass. Be a mighty fine place for kids!"

"I—I'm sorry, Ben. I'm not hinting, I don't think. It just seems easier to be talking."

He touched her arm again. "I know, Joyce. I guess I was just teasing a little, even though it is the truth."

Her hand found his, clung. "I'm scared, Ben. I'm terribly scared. It just

. . .doesn't seem right to be. . .trapped again. Ben. . . ."

Ben turned a little and she came quickly into his arms, clung to him, trembling, and he held her tightly. She felt good and right in his arms. Again he felt the thickness in his throat, the ache, and with it came a rising fury, a murderous hating of Pig Huey's bloody gang.

HE DIDN'T realize that he was cursing them in a savage whisper until he also became aware that Joyce was shaking him, speaking his name. "I—I'm sorry, Joyce. It's just that I—"

She put a finger lightly against his lips. "I know, Ben. It's the way I was feeling, too."

His hand gently stroked her hair then he kissed her on the lips. It was meant to be a light kiss, but it became instantly something more. He was holding her tightly, his lips holding hers in a deep long kiss that made him feel dizzy, that told him he could never get enough of this woman. She was kissing him back and her trembling was as shaken as his own.

They pulled apart then to stare wide eyed at each other. Then he pulled her close again, her uneven breath warm against his neck.

"Joyce, I—I—"

"Ben, you don't need to say it. It could be. . . . Maybe we can talk later, Ben. I—I'm afraid I'm too shaken to be sensible!"

She was more sensible than he was, Ben thought. She had put his vague knowing into words. He could tell her he loved her, wanted to marry her, and it would all somehow seem not sincere. If, when the pressure was off, they still felt the same. . . .

"You're right, Joyce. It will be better later."

This time it was a sweet kiss, companionable, affectionate.

"I'm not so scared any more, Ben. I don't feel so. . .cast off."

"Try to get some sleep," Ben said. "I don't think they'll try again. They'll wait. They value their murderous hides too much."

He spent the rest of the night alternately dozing and scanning the slope but no other attempt was made by the outlaws. With the dawn, Ben backed away and found another spot with a ridge of layered stone that gave him more protection, but with fissures to allow a close watch on the slope.

From where she lay, Joyce spoke quietly. "Ben, will it make any difference if I build a small fire?"

"It'll be all right. Get back in that big fissure yonder."

He watched her crawl away and later saw her gathering small pieces of brush to make her fire. Ben turned back to study the area where the outlaws were hidden. He saw the thin column from their breakfast fire, but no sign of them in the broken, scrub-brushed terrain.

Joyce came crawling up with two tin cups of coffee. She said. "The jerky is simmering. It was like iron."

Ben took the coffee, looking at her over the cup. Funny how he had thought yesterday, when he first saw her, that she wasn't even pretty, just passably attractive. And she didn't look as scrawny as he had thought, not the way she stuck out of that dress. Her color was much better, her dark eyes clear. Joyce Vann was a lovely woman. She colored a little more at his appraising look.

Ben grinned at her. "You sort of grow on a man, Joyce. You get prettier every time I look at you."

Her pleasure showed in her eyes but she only smiled and said softly, "Thank you, Ben."

They drank their coffee in a strangely companionable silence. Ben marveled to himself. Many women, as well as men, would be in a dither in the same circumstances. Yet this woman, who had been raised where there were policemen available to take care of any danger, could lie here with a smile in

her dark eyes with death all around them.

"Joyce, if we manage to get out of this, remind me to kidnap you for myself."

She smiled at him. "Is there any way I could cooperate?"

"Think about it. Now you stay down while I go get the jerky."

He went crawling away. The fissure where she had built the small fire was larger than Ben had thought, and extended back through the edge of the butte. Suddenly Ben was all attention as he saw the mountain lion tracks. If that fissure went through, and they could get down after dark tonight, with all night to walk. . . .

They would eat first; then, while Joyce kept watch, he would investigate the fissure. Ben was just turning toward the fire when he went suddenly still, intent. Again he heard the slight grating sound, like rough cloth against rock. Not a lion, with the smell of that fire. Ben drew his revolver, backed into a slight cranny where the fissure bent. The sound came again, closer.

Pressed flat against the rock, Ben couldn't see into the fissure, but he could hear the sound of breathing. Then he saw a moccasined foot appear, a leg, then the greasy buckskin and long braids of a breed. He had a gun in his hand. The opening did go through and the outlaws had found it!

"Ben!" Joyce called. "Ben?"

The breed glided forward as Joyce called again, closer. The breed cocked his gun, waiting now for Joyce to appear. Ben's fleeting thought of getting the man silently was instantly cast aside. That cocked gun would go off anyway when it fell, even if he could get his knife into the breed.

"Ben?" Joyce's head appeared.

Ben fired and the breed's gun went off. Rock flew, showering Joyce, and she screamed. The breed was hurled forward by Ben's bullet but as he fell he tried to turn his gun on Ben. Ben shot him again.

Joyce was holding her hand to her face, which was bleeding from rock slivers. Her eyes were staring from the breed to Ben. When Ben had seen she was otherwise unhurt, he said, "That fissure goes on through. Maybe we can get away tonight."

"Ben, I came to tell you. There's someone out there, in the flat. A lot of men."

BEN went quickly back to his ledge, Joyce crawling behind him. He saw the men there at once. After studying them for a minute, hope rose. To one who knew, those conical-hatted figures were not to be mistaken.

He turned to grin at Joyce. "Rurales! Somewhat like the Texas Rangers, honey. And you never saw tougher men in a fight! Those murderers down there can't see them, and I'm going to make sure they don't! Stay down, I'm going to draw their attention!"

Ben eased his rifle into firing position. He was sure someone was keeping watch on the slope but, as he saw no sign, he chose the spot where almost invisible smoke lifted. He sent six shots at the spot, then drew down even as bullets slapped at the crack from whence he had fired. He chose another position and sent two shots at the smoke from the rifle below.

There were shouts and cursing and then several more rifles began firing, and Ben kept low, satisfied for the moment. Those shots would give the Rurales a chance to locate the various positions. Ben occasionally fired to keep them concentrating on him. He could see no further sign of the Rurales. Any time now. . . .

There was a sudden burst of firing, startled shouts, then a wild, hair-raising series of screams. More yells, panicked shouts. The firing was scattered now and Ben caught only a few glimpses of movement in the brush and boulders. Then silence.

After a few minutes a voice shouted in Spanish, "You up there! Identify yourself!"

"Ben Franklin, Commandante!"

In English, "Show yourself, Senor!"

Ben promptly stood up leaving his rifle lying. "There is a woman with me, Commandante. I took her from Huey in the canyon yesterday." Ben reached his hand down and Joyce stood beside him.

The lean figure of the Rurale commander stepped from the brush, the bright trimmings on his leggings and jacket glinting in the sunlight. He walked forward, and slowly several of his men appeared at a respectful distance behind him. Ben started down with Joyce, slipping and sliding on the shale. They stopped in front of the Rurales officer.

"Ben Franklin, Colonel Diaz. We have met before at the house of the Alcalde of San Ramon."

The dark eyes in the lean hawk face regarded Ben alertly. "Ah, yes, Senor Franklin, I remember. Will you explain your presence in Mexico, and the Senorita's?"

Ben explained about himself and Joyce Vann. He noted the quick sympathy in the Rurales chief's eyes for Joyce Vann. Ben finished, "I was on my way to San Ramon to ask the alcalde's aid in requesting a meeting between you and Colonel Hager."

"And the reason?"

"The colonel will speak for himself, Senor Commandante. My words could only be my personal opinion."

"And that opinion, Senor Franklin?"

"For the colonel to take his troops into the Apache rancheria, do his business there and come straight out again."

"Your government's idea?"

"No, Commandante, just the colonel's."

"I am aware of your colonel's reputation. I will deal with him personally. Tell him I will meet him at the house of the alcalde in three weeks. Satisfactory?"

"Satisfactory. And thank you, Commandante."

"This Pig Huey, he was not among those killed here. Do you know if he was here?"

"No. I haven't seen him since yesterday when I wounded him."

"Possibly he was seriously hurt. We will look on the way back." He turned away. "The horses, Sergeant."

The sergeant climbed onto a boulder and sent a call across the flat. A few minutes later the horse holders brought up the horses, and the Rurales mounted. Colonel Diaz, mounted now on a black stallion, said to Ben, "Do not try to bury these carrion, Senor. Leave them for the buzzards, as they have left so many."

Ben and Joyce stood watching as the Rurales rode away. Ben said, "Wait here, honey, and I'll go get our horses."

He labored back up the shale slope, repacked their gear and saddled the horses. He brought them, sliding and snorting, back down the slope. Joyce was not in sight and Ben waited, not wanting to embarrass her by calling.

AFTER a few more minutes he began to have an uneasy feeling. It had taken him awhile to get the horses, more than enough time for her to have her privacy and return. The uneasiness grew stronger, and Ben tied the horses, got his rifle.

"Joyce? Joyce!"

"Here, Ben!"

Ben turned slowly, his guts crawling. Joyce appeared from the brush, but not alone. Pig Huey held her with one arm around her and the other arm akimbo, with a ten-inch blade pressed against her side. Pig Huey's chin was tucked over her right shoulder, a grin on his dirty face.

"Things look different now, eh, Ben?" Pig said.

Ben could see the filthy bandage on Pig's leg, probably from the wound he had sustained yesterday. His right arm had fresh blood on it. The fresh wound accounted for his lack of a gun. He had lost it in the fight but had somehow managed to evade the Rur-

ales. The lack of a gun was the only reason Ben was still alive.

"Lay your guns and knife down, Ben," Pig ordered, "and step clear."

"So you can kill both of us, Pig? No, thanks. I'm taking you in to the fort. Maybe a smart lawyer can keep you from hanging, but I doubt it."

Pig lost his grin. "I'll cut her liver out."

"You probably will, Pig, but then you won't have any protection, will you? Then I'll put a bullet through both knees and leave you for the buzzards."

"You don't want the girl killed, and you know I'll do it."

"I know. So what? After she's been a plaything for you and your buzzards, who would touch her? Not me, Pig. Not any decent man. So kill her!" Ben cocked his rifle. "Go ahead, Pig!"

Ben didn't look at the dead-white, shocked face of Joyce Vann. He knew what he would see. He was looking at the wild-eyed, raging face of Pig Huey. He knew what his and Joyce's fate would be if he complied with Pig's order. They'd be dead in short order.

Ben didn't look, either, at the akimbo arm of Pig Huey that held the deadly knife. He knew what he had to do and he didn't dare hesitate or think about it. He shifted his eyes, aimed in the same instant, and fired.

It was a moment before Ben could see the outflung, shattered elbow through the smoke, and the knife flung away. Pig staggered and released Joyce, and she fell. Pig lunged for the knife with his left hand. Ben shot him again and the heavy bullet flung him two yards away. Pig Huey had murdered his last victim.

Joyce had raised herself on her hands and knees and crouched there, looking at Pig and then at Ben, her face loose with shock and terror. Ben, after the first glance, didn't look at her again. He sat down, his legs suddenly unable to support him. If he had hit her.... He sat there trembling, wanting to say something to remove the effect of his merciless words of a few moments ago.

She was beside him and he looked up then. "Joyce, I—I didn't mean what I said. I had to take a chance. I'm sorry."

"What else could you have done, Ben? And stop mumbling. I hate men who mumble. What would the kids think of a father who mumbled?"

Ben looked up. Almost all the shock was gone; there was even a hint of a smile in her dark eyes. Ben began to feel better, and in moments he was feeling good, mighty good. This was a powerful lot of woman, and a man would be a fool to let her get away.

"Ma'am," Ben said, not mumbling, "when we get to the fort and you've had a bath and clean clothes, and are feeling like a regular sassy woman again, I got some things to say to you."

"Things that you won't feel you *ought* to say?"

"Things I can't *keep* from saying. We can build another room or two on that cabin right easy."

"Then I will be waiting to hear them, Ben."

Ben got up, helped her up. He kissed her soundly, then, when he began to feel breathless, said, "Let's go, honey, else I won't be able to wait to say it."

Smiling, hand in hand, they walked toward the horses.

Watch for

TREASURY OF GREAT WESTERN STORIES #3

On sale in July

Die by the gun

It seemed that Tommy Noble was going to have to learn the hard way that a man who lived by the gun couldn't avoid dying by it

BY ELMER KELTON

THE SUDDEN LIFT of his horse's head was Dolph Noble's first indication that the trail had run out. The dun's black-tipped ears pricked forward, and Noble's hand dropped to his gun. He jerked the dun to a halt and raised his left hand as a quick signal to the five riders behind him.

He squinted his wind-burned eyes against the hot glare of the Texas sun and searched out the thick brush on the hills ahead of him for sign of what the wind had carried to the sensitive nostrils of his horse. A tingle played up and down under the sweat-soaked back of his shirt. That thorny tangle of mesquite and catclaw could hide one man, or it could hide the whole band of Clayton Chasteen.

A bent-shouldered rider of fifty years eased up beside him. His narrowed eyes were chips of flint as his gaze probed over the rocky hills.

"They up there, you reckon, Dolph?"

Dolph Noble's mouth was a hard, straight line beneath three days' stubble, dirt and sweat. To most of the riders who sided him, he was still a young man. But already his gray eyes were old. The silver badge pinned to his shirt had done that for him.

"Can't say, Andy," he replied in a tight voice. "But we better fan out."

The horsemen pulled away from him on either side. There was no gallantry here, no romantic flourish. Just five brokendown old cowpunchers and a cautious sheriff, doing an unpleasant job.

The skin of his back still crawling, he pushed the dun into a slow walk. His right hand eased the gun out of its holster, and he thumbed the cylinder away from the empty safety chamber.

The bullet whined by him and ricocheted off the rocky hillside. The slap of the pistol shot echoed and re-echoed from the hills. Before the second shot, Dolph was off his horse and onto the ground, sprinting stifflegged into the scattering of brush.

He didn't look for the possemen. He didn't have to look to know they would be afoot, seeking cover as he was.

Fear was cold and clammy at the pit of his stomach, as it always was in a situation like this. But he never stopped moving up, working from bush

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to bush, putting himself closer to the gunman. His tense lips were dry as leather, and his eyes were desperately searching the brush ahead of him.

He got a glimpse as the man raised up from behind a mesquite and fired at him. The bullet tugged at Dolph's sleeve, raising a puff of dust. Dolph dropped behind a tiny cleft in the hillside.

Keeping his head down, he called, "This is Dolph Noble, the sheriff. You're surrounded. Better call it quits and come on down."

There was a long silence, and Dolph hoped the gunman was taking his advice. But when he raised his head, the gun exploded again. This time he waited. He knew he wouldn't have to wait long.

Sure enough, in a few minutes he heard Andy Biederman's heavy voice boom from above, "All right, mister, how about it?"

There was one more pistol shot, followed by the heavy roar of a saddlegun before there was time for an echo. The sound of a choked groan brought Dolph up in a stiff run.

The gunman lay on his face, his body drawn up in agony. Dolph kicked the pistol far away from the cramped fingers and carefully turned the outlaw over onto his back. He blanched, his heart sickening. Suddenly he hated the badge he wore.

Andy Biederman came picking his way down the rocky hillside, carrying a smoking saddlegun. The old puncher took one look at the dying ambusher, whose glazing eyes bulged in terror as they beheld the smothering blanket of death. Biederman's face fell, and his shoulders suddenly sagged.

His gruff old voice was broken and miserable. "A kid, Dolph. Just a slick-faced kid."

OLD LEW MATLOCK leaned a thin shoulder against the weathered siding of his big frame livery barn. He watched with narrow interest the six horsemen moving slowly across the brushspotted draw and up the wagon road that led into the

western end of Twin Wells' dusty main street. Squinting his pale eyes, he could see the heavy sag of the men's shoulders as the trailing sun sent their shadows searching far out ahead of them.

Sheriff Dolph Noble rode half a length in the lead. Dust set a gray cast to his shirt that had been blue, and sweat-salt showed dull white under the arms and down the back.

Noble reined up before the livery barn and turned stolidly in his saddle.

"We'd just as well break it up here," he said quietly, as if it was an effort even to speak. "My thanks to all of you."

His wrinkle-carved face still grim and sick, Andy Biederman lifted his gnarled hand in tired, wordless salute and pulled his long-legged sorrel aside. One by one the other riders peeled off and plodded their various ways, sagging in fatigue.

The last man moved up hesitantly, bringing a led horse behind him. "The button's horse, Dolph. What you want done with it?"

Noble's sun-cracked lips tightened. His big fist knotted, then he reached out and took the reins. "I'll take care of him, George. You go on home and get you some rest."

Lew Matlock stepped out of the broad open door as Dolph Noble stiffly eased down from the saddle. The liveryman eyed him levelly, knocking ashes out of his pipe on the heel of his hand. There was no word of greeting, just an understanding nod between them. That was all that was needed. They had been friends since Dolph was a short-pants kid, thirty years and more ago.

"See what you can get for the saddle, Lew," Dolph Noble said.

Matlock shoved his cold pipe into his shirt pocket. "You got one of them, did you?"

Dolph's tired gaze settled on the hardtromped floor and the scattering of dry hay there. "Just a kid, Lew. Twenty, maybe, or twenty-one. About like my brother Tommy. He'd been wounded, and they'd gone off and left him. He wouldn't surrender. He had to fight it out."

Lew Matlock sensed the bleakness that ached in Dolph. "Lawing's a dirty business sometimes, Dolph," he said in sympathy. "But somebody's got to do it."

A bitter anger welled up in Dolph's throat and died there. He pointed at the brand on the hip of the young outlaw's horse.

Lew Matlock frowned. "Long L. Can't say as I'm surprised."

Dolph's lips were tight. "They'll lie out of it. They'll say it was stole."

Impatiently he unfastened his saddle girth and jerked at the cinch. Lew Matlock gently pushed him aside.

"I'll take care of the horses. You go on and get cleaned up, and catch some rest."

Dragging his worn boots down the sandy street toward the sheriff's office, Dolph tried to stretch the saddle stiffness out of him. It wasn't as easy as it used to be; he knew that only a long night's sleep would do it. He knew, too, that there would be little sleep for him tonight. They had killed a man today. With darkness the grim picture would rush at him a thousand times, as other such pictures had done in the past.

From his room in the back end of the office he picked up clean clothes and angled across the barber shop. By the freshly-painted peppermint sign he paused to grind out a tasteless cigarette with his boot heel.

The barber didn't ask any foolish questions. He was another old friend, like Lew Matlock, and he knew when not to ask too much. Anyway, the news had beaten Dolph in.

Daubling the lather on, the barber said regretfully, "Something I hate to tell you, Dolph, but you ought to know. Hoggy Truscott's been itching for you to get back. Seems like your brother Tommy got in a little jackpot over at Hoggy's saloon a couple of nights ago. Him and that wild com-

panero of his, that Herndon kid."

Dolph groaned inwardly, impatient anger growing in him. There was always a jackpot of some kind or other. "What was it this time?"

The barber frowned. "Now, Dolph, don't be hard on the boy. He's a good kid, just got a few wild oats to sow yet. You never had a chance to sow any. Maybe that's why you don't understand him." The razor was sharp and quick. "I got an idea Tommy was still peeved because you wouldn't let him go with you on that posse, Dolph. Anyhow, him and Pete Herndon sat in on a game with that long-legged gambler that's been hanging around Hoggy's lately.

"They got a notion the gambler was cheating, which most likely he was. They throwed it in to him, and he started to pull a gun. The two boys swarmed all over him then, mopped up the saloon with him good and proper. But they kind of busted up the place doing it. Now the gambler's left town. Hoggy's probably madder about that than he is about the damage. I think he was getting a percentage."

Dolph sat in angry silence, his hands gripped tightly on the arms of the chair. The barber was right. He didn't understand Tommy. But he had tried to. He had tried hard.

A LONG SOAK in the shop's castiron tub had drained some of the fatigue out of Dolph Noble. Now, walking up the dusty street in the reddish glow of sunset, he felt fresher, and some of the weight was gone from his shoulders.

His whiskers gone, he was a smooth-faced man with features not young but not yet those of middle age. Wrinkles bit deep into the brown skin at the corners of his eyes, the result of years of squinting across a sun-drenched land. His squarish jaw bore a sombre set, for he had been jolted up against hard reality at an age when most boys were still full of play. He had been there ever since.

His gaze swept far ahead of him and picked out the small frame house just at the edge of town, where the street began to dwindle into a powder-ground pair of wagon tracks. In front of it he paused for a moment, half in eagerness to go in, yet feeling a strong tug of regret.

His eye caught the quick movement of lace curtains in the side window of a house nearby, and an ironic grin grin broke across his cracked lips. He walked up onto the little porch and knocked.

Lila Chasteen opened the door and stepped back. She was a woman of thirty, with a slender grace and stoical dignity. There was much of youth left in her oval face, but trouble had brought maturity to her dark blue eyes. Silent welcome showed in the eyes now, as she stepped aside for Dolph. But with it was a desperate worry.

He took off his hat and tried a smile that somehow didn't materialize. An uneasy silence stood between them. Then she asked. "Did you see Clayton?"

He shook his head. "No, Lila. We didn't *see* him."

Her chin dipped a little, and she bit her lip. "But you're sure it was him?"

Again he nodded. "I wish I could say different, Lila. But there's no use lying to you about it. It was him, all right."

He sensed that she had known, even before he had come in, that there was no longer any hope. There had remained only the cruel formality of telling her.

He lowered his head. "It makes me hate myself, Lila, and hate being what I am. I wish it wasn't me that had to tell you. I wish—"

Bitterness welled into his voice. "I wish sometimes I was a cowboy again, or a merchant, even a section hand. Anything but a gun-carrying lawman."

Her hand quickly lifted to his arm. "Don't, Dolph. It's not your fault. It was bound to happen. And I'm glad

it's you who heads the law here, not someone else."

Then she said, "You're tired, Dolph. Sit down, won't you?"

He looked levelly into her eyes. "I guess I'd better not, Lila. I saw old lady Kittredge's curtains move aside as I walked up. Likely as not, she's timing us. I'd better go."

Color deepened in her face. "Then you've heard the gossip, too. There's been plenty of it—about the sheriff and the outlaw's wife," she said in quick sharpness.

"I ignore idle gossip," he told her.

Her eyes lifted. They were honest eyes, eyes that could tell of love, had they not already told of so much heartbreak. "A *man* can afford to," she said. "I guess you're right, Dolph. You'd better go."

At the door she reached out and caught his hand. She held it in her own for a long moment. "Thanks, Dolph, for coming by."

Dolph longed to pull her to him, to hold her tightly and never let anything hurt her again. But he was old enough to know the futility of it, and to keep tight rein on himself. He said simply, "Good night, Lila," and moved quickly into the street.

BACK IN HIS OFFICE he sank wearily into the straight, hard chair at his rolltop desk. He dug out the letter that had been found in the dead young outlaw's pocket. For the fifth or sixth time he read it through, his mouth straight and hard. It was a letter from the boy's mother. Smudged and badly creased, it evidently had been carried a long time.

Dolph took a blank sheet of paper out of a desk drawer and whittled a new point on a pencil stub. He stared at the paper a long time, his teeth biting deep into the pencil. Then he bent over the desk and began to write laboriously, a frown cutting dark lines across his leather-brown face.

Dear Mrs. Merchant:

As sheriff of this country, it becomes my most painful duty to inform you of your son's death. It was an accident, his horse falling on him while he was chasing a runaway cow. It was quick, he felt no pain.

Your boy had not been here long, but he was well liked and a hard worker.

Dolph paused a while, his fists knotted. He reached into his pocket and pulled out an old leather billfold. He took most of the money out of it, counted it, and tucked it into the envelope.

Your son had a month's wages coming to him. His boss asked me to mail the money to you. Also, we are selling his saddle. Will remit payment as soon as the sale is made.

Your most sympathetic servant,
Dolph Noble, Sheriff.

Dolph slipped the letter into the envelope, licked the flap, and stuck it down with pressure from his big brown hand.

He was so absorbed in the letter that he didn't know the girl had come into the office until she spoke. He looked up in quick surprise, his face warming. For a second he was afraid she might know what was in the letter. Then he realized she couldn't, and he was relieved.

"Howdy, Dolph," said Susan Lane. "You had supper yet?"

She was a slight girl of eighteen, with flaxen hair and honest brown eyes that could dance with laughter. Dolph shoved back from his desk, surreptitiously pushing the letter under a stack of papers. He really smiled, for the first time in a good many days. "I swear, Susan, you get younger and prettier every day, while I just get older and uglier."

Color crept into her pleased face,

and she bowed in an exaggerated curtsy.

Dolph reached into his shirt pocket for his tobacco. Deftly she took it out of his hands, rolled him a cigarette and placed it in his mouth. She pulled a match from the band of his dusty old hat, which hung from the top of a cane-bottomed chair.

Dolph leaned back with a pleased smile and dragged long at the cigarette. "You oughtn't to do things like that. You make an old bachelor see the error of his ways."

Laughter danced in her bright brown eyes. "Just practicing. A bride-to-be has to learn little touches like that."

Dolph grunted, a frown slowly forming on his face. "I'm afraid it may take more than that, Susan. The girl who marries Tommy needs to be tough as a bronc stomper, and still have the patience of Job."

Her brown eyes went serious. They looked at Dolph, and fearfulness showed in them. "Dolph," she said, "he's your brother. But in so many ways he's different. He's—"

Her gaze dropped to the floor. "I love him, Dolph. I want him more than I could ever tell you. But sometimes I wish—I wish he was you."

DOLPH leaned forward and placed his hand on her shoulder. "I guess we're both going to have to give him time, Susan. We've got to remember that he wasn't raised with a mother to guide him, or a dad to teach him what he ought to know. I had to be brother and dad both to him, and most of the time I was working too hard to be much of either one.

"Besides, I guess I was too much older than him to teach him like a brother, and still not old enough to understand him like a father would. He grew up with a wildness in him that's going to work its way out in spite of both of us. We've just got to wait, and watch, and hope he finds the right road bye and bye."

She forced a quick smile. "I guess so, Dolph. I guess so."

She rubbed a hand across her eyes and said, "I didn't come here to tell you my troubles. I came to invite you over to the house for supper. We've got some fresh pie. And besides, Dad wants to talk to you."

Stiffly, the fatigue settling back into him, he arose from the chair. He grinned at the girl. "Well now, if it's pie you've got, just lead the way."

The Lanes lived in a big frame house in the south part of town. John Lane had built the place when Susan had gotten old enough to go to school and the family had to be moved in from the ranch. The Lanes were a big family. It looked as if they had a good many more years to spend here before the last of the youngsters had finished school.

Big John Lane sat on his wide front porch, contentedly drawing on his pipe and watching two of his youngest boys chasing each other up and down over the painted porch railing. As Dolph climbed the steps with Susan, the gray-thatched Lane took the pipe from his mouth and grinned genially.

"Sit down, Dolph. The womenfolks haven't quite got supper ready yet."

Dolph eased into a cane chair beside the big man. He watched the two rowdy boys and listened to their shrill yelping, and he knew a vague regret, a feeling of something missed.

Frowning, John Lane knocked the ashes out of his pipe and refilled it with fresh tobacco.

"Been some things happening around here lately, Dolph, things I don't like. Maybe you've got wind of them, and maybe you haven't. There's a big move shaping up to get you out of office."

Dolph showed no sign of surprise or regret. "I don't think I'd much care, John. I think I might be glad to turn it over to somebody else."

Lane said something under his breath as he failed to light his pipe with the first match. "But not to the

one who'd get it, Dolph. If you lost out, the office would go to Rance Ostrander."

Dolph glanced quickly at Lane. "Rance? Now, who'd elect Rance? Everybody knows why I fired him as deputy. They ought to know how the law would degenerate around here if he was the sheriff."

Lane nodded grimly. "Ought to. But sometimes people get to wanting a change so bad they'll take anything, just so it's different."

Scowling fiercely, he flipped away a match that had burned his fingers. "There are more people against you than you think, Dolph. Rance and his bunch are doing all they can to fire them up. Why, they're even saying you don't really want to catch Clayton Chasteen. That his wife has you—" Sudden anger flared in Dolph's eyes. Lane broke it off and said apologetically, "I guess I shouldn't have told you that. But I figured you ought to know how far they're going with it."

His face clouded, Dolph leaned forward and doubled his fists. "I don't care what they say about me. But they'd better leave Lila out of it."

Mrs. Lane stuck her head out of the door and called:

"It's ready, men. And John, you leave that pipe outside."

John stood up with Dolph. His hand was on the sheriff's shoulder. "But they won't leave her out of it, Dolph. There's only one answer. You've got to bring in Chasteen. And you've got to do it soon."

They walked inside.

THE SHERIFF sat in the straight chair outside the door of his office, watching the stars brighten against the deepening black of the sky. The night air had turned cool and pleasant after the baking heat of the day. From down the street came the faint tinkling of a piano at Hoggy Truscott's place, broken now and then by a howl of laughter. Dolph reminded himself that he would have to go down there in the morning and talk to Hoggy about Tommy's fight.

From far up the street came the leisurely thump of horse's hoofs in the soft sand. A horse hitched across the street from the office lifted its head and pointed its ears toward the sound.

Tommy Noble trotted up in front of the office and swung down from the saddle with the easy grace of a born cowpuncher. He wrapped the reins around a post and stepped up onto the wooden sidewalk, dusting the legs of his trousers as he walked. He was a slender youth, quick of wit and movement, and handsome enough that half the young girls of the town watched him covertly wherever he went. There was many a girl who didn't like Susan Lane any more.

Tommy stopped abruptly as he saw Dolph sitting there in the near darkness. He nodded. "Heard you were back in."

Dolph grunted an answer. He felt an old tightening within him. He was going to try to hold himself down this time. He was going to try to keep from losing his patience.

The youngster said, "They say you didn't catch up with Clayton Chasteen."

Dolph's eyes were steady on his kid brother's face. "That's right."

The kid's reserve suddenly left him and he was bending over close, his voice intense.

"Well, what else could you expect, taking along a bunch of old worn-our hands like that for a posse? Andy Biederman. Why, he can't even get on a horse by himself any more. And George Castleberry. George couldn't hear a gun go off if you held it right by his ear. The rest are just about as bad."

Dolph's voice was tightening. "Andy's stiff, you're right about that. But he's still the best shot in the country. And George Castleberry can track a cat over bare rock.

"What's more, Tommy, they know

what they're doing. They'll get there if anybody can, and they'll get back in one piece. They won't be out chasing after glory like half-baked kids and get their heads shot off. They'll be there when you need them, and they'll do whatever's got to be done."

Tommy pondered that. "But, Dolph, I'm a good shot, too; you got to admit that. I can even beat you."

Dolph nodded.

"And I'm twenty-one, Dolph. I'm already older than you were the first time they pinned a deputy badge on you."

The heat beginning to color his voice, Dolph said, "Some kids are grown by the time they're fifteen. And there are others who never do grow up."

Tommy stiffened. Dolph went on impatiently: "Tommy, I've told you a hundred's times. A lawman's life is no good; not for me and not for you. I've wished to God I'd never started at it. Now I've been at it so long I can't quit.

"But I'm not letting you get trapped that way. You start living with a gun, and bye and bye you have to kill somebody. Then you get to where you can't live without a gun. Everywhere you go, it's got to go with you. You live by it, and one day you die by it. I'd give all I've got if I could back up and start over. I can't. But I can see that you get a different start. That's why you'll never get a badge, Tommy. Not from me."

The boy's anger was almost crackling in the darkness. Tommy turned on his bootheel and stomped back toward his horse.

"Wait a minute, Tommy," Dolph called, his voice milder. The boy stopped.

"I was talking to John Lane about you. He still wants you to take over the running of his home ranch. Living in town and being a director of the bank keeps him too busy to take care of it himself the way he wants to. It'd be a fine start for you, Tommy. He'd pay well, and you could go ahead and marry Susan. You ought to go talk to John, and tell him you want the job."

Even in the darkness, he could feel the boy's piercing glare. "I wish you'd let me alone, and quit telling me what to do. Maybe I'd like the kind of life you live. I'm of age. You've got no right any more to try to stop me. If you won't give me a chance, I'll have to find it someplace else."

He jerked the reins loose from the post, swung into the saddle, and moved away at a stiff trot. Dolph stared after him until the boy had disappeared into the thick darkness of the street. He rolled a cigarette, took only a couple of puffs on it, then bitterly ground it under his heel.

Suddenly the night was no longer cool. The air was hot and close and uncomfortable, and he found himself soaking in sweat. He got up and started walking, hoping to find relief.

HOGGY TRUSCOTT'S saloon was in a big false-fronted building that stood off apart from the others on the street. The front of it had been given a fresh coat of bright red paint the year before, but the sides and back were still dark and peeling, needing paint badly. Stopping in front of it, Dolph noted a front window broken out. He wondered if that was Tommy's work, or if some other fight had done it.

Hoggy was sitting at a table with Rance Ostrander. Their low-pitched talk stopped as Dolph walked in. Hoggy stood up quickly, shoving back his chair. Unconsciously he wiped his hands on the greasy apron hung around his middle. Although the morning was not yet really hot, Hoggy was without a shirt. Sweat stained his dingy underwear.

"Morning, Dolph," he said, his voice neither friendly nor hostile. "I been hoping you'd come by, so I wouldn't have to go see you."

Dolph halted in the middle of the floor, looking around him, trying to lo-

cate the source of the stale smell that seemed to ooze from every corner of the place. Hoggy was a poor customer of soap, and he kept only a small water barrel.

"I understand Tommy and Pete Herndon busted up some furniture," Dolph said. "What do you figure I owe you?"

Hoggy frowned. His little eyes set in their usual attitude of irritation. "Well, in the first place, they busted one table and two chairs. I figure that's worth, say, five dollars. I can get it fixed. Then they busted the corner out of the mirror behind the bar. It cost me twenty dollars new."

Dolph frowned. He remembered seeing that corner broken out a long time ago.

Hoggy pointed a thumb at the broken front window. "They busted that, too. That's the one they throwed Mr. Duckworth through."

Dolph said, "Tell you what, Hoggy. I'll give you twenty dollars to cover the whole thing, and we both forget about it."

Hoggy's mouth turned down at the corners. "Seems to me I'm entitled to more. I figured the damage at twice that much."

Dolph's tone was firm. "Twenty's enough. I ought not to give you anything, you trying to get by me with that mirror."

He held out the twenty dollars. Hoggy grabbed it, counted it, and shoved it deep into his pocket. "If you wasn't the sheriff," he said grudgingly. "I wouldn't let you get away with this. But it wouldn't do me much good to sue you."

Rance Ostrander, the ex-deputy, spoke up for the first time. "Don't fret over it, Hoggy. Come election, he won't be sheriff no more."

Rance Ostrander was a lean, hungry-looking man in a dirty shirt. There was too much white around his eyes, making them look bigger than they really were. They were eyes that always smouldered with a brooding resentment.

"Yeah, Hoggy," he repeated with a wry grin, "after election, old Dolph's liable to come to you looking for a job swamping out the saloon." Rance's words were formed like a joke, but Dolph knew they were meant. "Dolph, they tell me you could've caught Clayton Chasteen if you'd really wanted to, if you'd taken some real deputies along. You had a good deputy once, if you'd had sense enough to keep him."

Dolph's anger began to build. "You know why I fired you, Rance. You wouldn't stay sober, and you couldn't stay away from these women down here. You know I couldn't keep a man like that."

Rance Ostrander stood up, a malevolent grin on his sallow face. "Listen to who's talking, Hoggy. I see him last night, walking out toward the edge of town. Wasn't the first time, and ain't apt to be the last."

Dolph's face flamed. His fists balled, but he held himself in check.

Rance added, "There's only one way we'll ever catch Clayton Chasteen. That's to run that Chasteen woman out of town and then either make Dolph tend to his business or run him out too."

Dolph took a long step toward Rance, then stopped. He realized that that was what Rance was asking for. He sensed that other men had come into the saloon and stood behind him, watching. He dropped his fists.

"Don't you ever mention her name again, Rance," he said in a low voice. "If you do, I'll take off this badge and give you the whipping of your life."

He turned quickly and elbowed his way out, the whole outdoors a flaming red in front of him.

IT WAS a hot ten-mile ride out to Brant Lawton's Long L. The ranch was isolated by a rough range of hills which divided the watershed and sent the infrequent runoff

water from the Long L coursing down toward the Pecos.

But the Long L was well favored with lengthy draws which grew grass knee-high. It made a good place for raising horses, which was Lawton's principal business. He also raised some cattle, although some people said they weren't all his own. And there were some who said he wasn't always careful who he sold his horses to, either.

The house was a long, rambling affair, leisurely built and leisurely kept. A scattering of junk littered the whole place. A huge pile of rusted tin cans behind the back door of the kitchen marked it as a batching camp.

Brant Lawton stood on the front porch, leaning against a wooden post. "Git down and come in, Sheriff," he said affably. "Cook's fixing dinner. We got time for a quick snort if you're a mind to."

Dolph shook his head. "No, thanks, Brant. Just wanted to talk a little."

He dropped his reins over a sagging fence picket and sat down on the rough edge of the porch beside Lawton. Lawton was a friendly man of about fifty. That was one trouble with being a lawman. It wasn't easy, taking action against somebody you liked.

Dolph picked up a long stick someone had been whittling on and idly began to sketch in the sand.

"You heard the latest about Clayton Chasteen, I reckon," he said.

Lawton nodded. "You mean about him trying to hold up the train west of here. Yeah, I heard."

"Baggage messenger drove them off with a shotgun," Dolph went on. "But they killed one man before they gave up. We trailed them for a couple of days. We only caught up with one of them." He paused. "That one was riding a Long L horse, Brant. And the messenger said he saw the Long L on two of the other horses as they came by."

He looked directly at Lawton. "You real sure you haven't seen Chasteen? Haven't sold him some horses?"

Lawton's face flushed. "You meaning to accuse me, Dolph?"

"I'm not accusing anybody. I'm just asking."

Lawton sat stewing in angry silence. Then he said stubbornly, "A week ago we turned up missing a bunch of horses from down on Towson's Draw. They was good horses, all broke to ride and handle."

"You never did report it to me," Dolph said pointedly.

"I was busy. Anyhow, they left us as many horses as they took. They was good horses, too, only tired and ganted a little. I just counted it off as a trade and decided to keep my mouth shut. I always found it a healthy policy, keeping my mouth shut."

Dolph said dryly, "So I've noticed."

He remounted his horse and swung around to face Lawton once more. "Just one more thing I want to say to you, Brant. You know that Chasteen's bunch has blood on its hands. And you know that anybody who helps them gets his hands bloody too. He'll share in the punishment. Just remember that, the next time you get to swapping horses."

HE PULLED his horse around and started to spur him back toward town. Boisterous shouting made him pull up and look toward a grassy flat east of the headquarters. There he saw three men in a race, spurring their horses toward him as fast as they could stretch, yelping at every stride. Behind them a couple of other riders followed at a more respectable pace.

The finish line appeared to be a big lone mesquite tree that stood a hundred yards from the corrals. Passing it, the three racers gradually pulled their horses to a halt and brought them around toward the house. The horses breathed hard and pranced nervously. The laughing men were red-faced and winded.

Dolph's mouth set rigidly as he watched them. The three riders were

within a stone's throw before they noticed him. One of them reined up sharply, and his laughter hushed.

"Come on, Tommy," Dolph said. "We're going back to town."

Tommy Noble didn't speak. Young Pete Herndon brought his heaving horse up alongside that of his young partner. "Aw now, Dolph," Herndon said, "Tommy's not hurting anything. We're just having us a little innocent fun. Just trying to show old Brant there that we've got horses as good as any of his."

"I'm not going to argue," Dolph spoke severely. "Tommy, you're coming along with me."

Tommy stubbornly held his ground a long moment, trying to stare his brother down. Then he shrugged his slim shoulders and moved up beside Dolph. The sheriff looked at young Pete Herndon.

"If I were you, Pete, I'd come along too. I don't think this is the right place for you either."

Herdon laughed, the devil dancing in his eyes. "Reckon I'll stay, Dolph. I'm having a right smart of fun. And I haven't got a bossy big brother."

The sheriff answered, "A pity you haven't, Pete. Come on, Tommy."

There wasn't a word between them for the first mile they jogged along the wagon trail under the heat of the noonday sun. Then Tommy said complainingly, "The least we could've done was wait for dinner. I'm starved out."

"Keep running with fast company like the Long L bunch, and you'll miss a lot of meals," Dolph retorted.

Tommy's face flushed in anger. "When're you ever going to stop treating me like I was a kid?"

"When you stop acting like one. Now shut up and let's ride."

According to the engraved gold watch the express company had given Dolph years ago, it was a little after two o'clock when they rode into town, the strained silence heavy between them. They moved down the street toward the hotel, their horses working along at a walk, their heads hanging a little.

"Hungry?" Dolph asked.

Tommy glared at him. "Drag me ten miles across country right at noontime and ask me if I'm hungry. Sure, I'm hungry."

They left their horses at Lew Matlock's big livery barn and walked back to the hotel, the Ranchers House. Tommy hung half a pace behind his brother. They went through the little lobby to the back porch, washed their faces in the washpan there, and dried on the same damp towel. The dining room was empty, for the other customers had long since eaten and gone on.

Dolph looked around for Lila Chasteen but didn't see her. An older woman came out of the kitchen to wait on them.

"Sorry we're so late, Mrs. OToole," Dolph said. "Got too far from home."

"Thats all right," she said pleasantly. "We still have some good roast. I declare, in this hot weather it seems like we always cook too much."

Dolph shifted around uneasily in his chair before he finally asked the question that was nagging him. "Where's Lila?"

Mrs. OToole looked down uncertainly. "She's not here, Dolph. Fact of the matter is, she quit. This noon. Pretty upset. If you ask me, it was something Rance Ostrander said to her. But she wouldn't tell me. Just said she had to leave."

Dolph stared at the clean tablecloth, his hands unsteady. He had been hungry a moment ago. Now he wasn't. He stood up and put aside the big napkin he had spread out across his lap.

"I believe I'll just let that roast go for now," he said. "Maybe I'll be in later."

Tommy's eyes were on his. He was anticipating a fight. "Want me to go with you?"

Shaking his head, Dolph paused at

the door. "You just stay and eat your dinner."

THE SUN bearing down hot on him, he walked briskly down the street, dust rising with his quick stride. In front of Lila Chasteen's little frame house he turned in and stepped up onto the small porch. The front door way open. He knocked hurriedly, then walked in.

Lila looked up in surprise. She was packing clothes into a heavy trunk. Dolph glanced about the room. He saw that it was nearly bare of the things that had made the place her own.

"Lila," he said. His voice, forced to quietness, carried with it surprise and deep disappointment.

Her blue eyes were upon his face, filled with hurt. "Dolph," she said huskily, "I know what I'm doing. Don't try to talk me out of it, please."

He still stood where he had halted, just inside the door. His face was pinched and drawn.

"You can't leave, Lila. Forget whatever it was they said to you. Please stay here, for me."

Her eyes lowered, and he saw a tear break along her cheek. "I can't. That why I'm going, Dolph—for you."

He stepped forward then, just one step, and stopped again. "Lila, you said once you wouldn't let them crowd you out of town. You stood up stubborn and proud and said you'd stay till you got good and ready to go."

Her voice was tight. "But then it was only *me*, Dolph. Now they're using me as a means to hurt you. Can't you see? I can't stay and let them do this to you."

Dolph stepped forward again, this time right up to her. He gripped her shoulders and pulled her tightly against him. "Don't do it, Lila. There's nothing they can do to me or say about me that would hurt me half as much as losing you."

A quick sob broke from her. Her hands closed about his arms, and she held him tightly.

"Dolph, Dolph," she cried helplessly, "what's to become of us?"

A long moment he held her there, his throat tight and painful. He could think of no answer. He knew that with Lila he felt a sense of fulfillment, a feeling that there was something in life for him besides hard work and heartache and the solid, deadly weight of the gun that rode always upon his hip.

It was Lila who broke the silence. Her soft voice was strained to the point of breaking. "You know it's hopeless for us, don't you, Dolph? I'm a married woman. That I'm married to an outlaw, a man I no longer love, doesn't alter the fact. I'm still a married woman."

He said, "We could go away together. Any judge in the country would set you free."

She shook her head. "No, Dolph. You know how people would feel about divorce. They wouldn't accept it. Neither would I. Besides, they need you here, Dolph. As much as you may hate that gun you carry, they need it. So we have to be strong, Dolph. We have to make ourselves forget. You've got to pretend you never met me, that all this never happened."

Dolph's face was suddenly old. "It would be a lie, Lila. I did meet you, and everything changed. Nothing will ever be the same as it was, even if you leave now and I never see you again."

He turned half around, his head down, his misty gaze on the floor. "Please stay a while longer, Lila. I've got some hard times ahead of me now. Without you, I'd just as well give up at the start."

Their eyes met. "Please stay a while longer, Lila," he pleaded again. "I need you."

She melted into his arms, and he had his answer.

OUTSIDE Lila's house, Dolph paused in thought, but only for a moment. His fists drew up, and he moved on grimly with long determined strides. He didn't slow up until he had walked through the open door of Hoggy Truscott's saloon.

His eyes raked the smelly room, then pounced on Truscott. "I'm looking for Rance Ostrander. Where's he at?"

Hoggy Truscott's little eyes widened in alarm. "Ain't seen him since dinner. He might be in any one of a dozen places."

Dolph's voice coiled back like a whiplash. "Don't tell me where he might be. Tell me where he's at."

A genuine alarm gripped Truscott's round face. "Don't go jumping on *me*, Dolph. If I was looking for him, I'd go to his room. He most generally takes a nap during the heat of the day—like now."

Rance Ostrander kept a room in an unkempt rooming house a little way down the street. He had a door opening to the outside so he could come and go quietly, without waking up the crotchety old man who ran the place.

Dolph found Rance's door ajar just enough to let in the air without letting in any stray dogs. He shoved it open. It dragged across the sandy, warped floor with a grating noise that made Rance Ostrander sit bolt upright on his cot. He blinked the sleepiness from his wide-open eyes. One long stride brought Dolph up against the cot. He grabbed Rance's collar and jerked the man upward.

"If you say a word to me, I'll knock you through that wall," Dolph breathed, his voice even and sharp as a skinning knife. "You just sit there and listen.

"I don't know what it was you said to Lila Chasteen. You better hope to God I don't ever find out. But let me tell you this, Rance Ostrander. If you ever bother her again—if you ever say another word to her—I'll find you wherever you are and beat you to death!"

With a rushing surge of anger he shoved Ostrander back so hard that the man's head bumped sharply against the wall. Ostrander's mouth hung open, and his lips were quivering. But sleepiness and sudden surprise had tied his tongue.

He huddled back against the wall and watched with frightened, blurry eyes as Dolph stomped out and moved on up the street. . . .

No one found any trace of Clayton Chasteen and his bunch. Small searching parties trailed west and southwest, cutting for sign in the rough brush country where a man could hide unseen in a clump of brush and shoot a rider at six paces. It was a fruitless search.

Dolph even enlisted the brief aid of a Texas Ranger who had been on another mission and was returning to headquarters. The Ranger, with a couple of cowboys from John Lane's ranch, never turned up a trace.

As always, Tommy Noble needled Dolph to let him go out with a posse. And as always, Dolph ruled him down. So Tommy rode out anyway and joined the Ranger and his two cowboy helpers.

Dolph was waiting when Tommy got back. Tommy stood at stiff attention while Dolph hotly unloaded the anger that had built up in him through these anxious days. An angry tremble in him, the boy said nothing. When Dolph was through, Tommy turned away, leading his horse toward Lew Matlock's stable.

By dark, Dolph knew there was no longer any doubt about it. Tommy had left. His clothes were gone, and he had taken both his good horses.

His conscience heavy, Dolph went to the Lane home and called for Susan. Her brown eyes still showed the sign of her crying.

"He wouldn't tell me anything," the girl said in a breaking voice. "He just said he was leaving. He asked me to

wait. That's all, Dolph. He didn't say another word."

Dolph lowered his head. He felt only a foot tall. "Don't blame him, Susan. Blame me. It was my fault. I've had so much to worry me, I rode him a little too hard. Maybe I ought to've stopped trying to force him into something he didn't want. Maybe if I'd let him alone, he'd have found himself by this time. As it is, he's still got it all ahead of him."

A FEW MORNINGS later, Lila Chasteen didn't show up for work at the hotel dining room.

"Maybe you better go over and see what's the matter, Dolph," Mrs. O'Toole said, her brow knitted in worry. "She hasn't been feeling too good lately. She's fretted too much."

There was no answer to Dolph's insistent knocking on Lila's front door, nor to his calling her name. He walked in, and his heart sank.

There had been a struggle that much was clear. A chair was turned over, and the framed picture of Lila's mother and father hung at a crazy angle on the wall. A bureau drawer was open, and clothing hung out over its edge as if someone had grabbed quickly for a few items and had left the rest where it fell.

Two long strides carried Dolph into the kitchen. The rear door hung ajar over the small back porch. The soft ground was marred by the tracks of milling horses.

Dolph stood numb, his gaze fatened on the horizon, which stood razor sharp in the morning air. A tormenting fear drained him of strength. Whoever had taken her, she hadn't gone of her own will.

Someone called his name. He turned jerkily, like a man caught up in a terrible dream. It was the kid who swamped out the livery stable for Lew Matlock.

"Dolph," the boy shouted breathlessly, "Lew says you better come running. It's about Clayton Chasteen."

Trotting heavily, Dolph followed the youngster back to the barn. His heart was hammering against his ribs when he stopped in front of the big door. Lew Matlock's face was red with excitement.

"Dolph," Matlock said quickly, "Brant Lawton just rode in. He seen Clayton Chasteen and his bunch."

Lawton stepped out into the early morning sun. "That's right, Dolph. They came by my place about daylight. Five of them. And they had Chasteen's wife with them."

Dolph froze.

Lawton continued, "It was easy to tell she wasn't with them because she wanted to be. I seen Chasteen draw back and slap her once. They took fresh horses and rode on. They was headed west."

Desperation had hold of Dolph. But there was still room for a cagey distrust. "Why did you come in and report this, Brant? You've always been one to keep your mouth shut."

Lawton shrugged. "I changed my mind. Maybe it was what he was doing to the woman. Anyhow, I've told you. The rest is up to you."

Dolph whirled into action. "Max," he said to the boy, "you go round up my posse for me. Hurry. You know them. Andy Biederman, George Castleberry, and the rest. Tell them to get here as quick as they can."

He turned on his boot heel. "Lew, you get some horses caught up. I'll try to find a few more boys around here to go along."

He peered intently at Brant Lawton. "You coming, Brant?"

Lawton shook his head. "I've done my part already, Dolph. Clayton's been my friend in the past. I won't help you run him down."

Dolph made a quick *vuelta* through the business end of Twin Wells and picked up a couple of stray cowboys to go along. In about twenty minutes his posse was saddled up and ready to ride, seven men strong.

CHASTEEN'S tracks were as plain as if they had been left on purpose. But there was no need to follow them the first ten miles to Lawton's Long L. In a stiff trot the posse broke out over the rough divide and slanted down the head of a long draw, the curing brown grass yielding its settled dust.

Dolph swung down at a surface tank which Lawton had gouged in the edge of a draw to catch runoff from the rains and hold it for livestock water. He loosened his cinch and let his horse have its fill of water. Sweat speckled the dun's hide, but the day hadn't reached its peak of heat, and the horse didn't drink much.

Other possemen were afoot, watering their mounts the same way. Andy Biederman handed his reins to a younger puncher and hobbled stiffly around to another side of the tank where mud had not been stirred up by restless hoofs. He pitched his hat to one side, flopped on his belly, and drank long and deeply of the brownish water.

"A little thick," he said at last, wiping his gray-sprinkled moustache with his sleeve, "but it's wet."

A couple of the younger cowboys grinned sheepishly and followed his example. But it didn't take them long to get their fill.

Another time Dolph would have gotten a kick out of it. But there was no humor in him now. His mind dwelt on Lila.

"Hurry up," he said impatiently. "Let's get a move on."

They circled the ranch house. Dolph briefly considered stopping and getting some fresh horses. But he saw none near, and it probably would take an hour to catch some. Their own horses hadn't been far enough to tire them much, he decided. They would go on.

George Castleberry was Dolph's tracker. But the youngest puncher in the bunch could have followed the trail Chasteen and his men left as they rode west from the Long L corrals. With the tracks so plain, it was all Dolph could do to keep from swinging into a lope to make time while the trailing was so easy. But when one of the young men suggested they do just that, Andy Biederman voiced the thought that had held Dolph back.

"A man on a wore-out horse had just as well be afoot."

Dolph swung into a stiff trot and held it for long stretches at a time. The pace had slowed considerably, however, by the time the men pulled up again at a creek which wound a crooked course in a generally southern direction. It was a spring-fed creek that was usually dry. But heavy rains a month before had pepped up the spring, and the flow had not yet quit.

The jolting of the heavy trot had beaten a stiff weariness into the men. They were glad to ease down to the ground for a few moments while their horses watered. Every man walked a few paces upstream and took a long fill of the clean water—every man but Dolph Noble. The impatience still dogged him. He was hardly aware of the dryness of his mouth. He scooped up some water in the crown of his hat gulped down a little, and pulled the hat back on.

"Let's go," he said.

It had been many hours since the Chasteen horses had climbed out of the creek on the opposite bank and moved on west toward the rough country. The heat of the sun had dried the tracks cut deep into the creekbank.

Dolph noted that the Chasteen bunch seemed to be riding closer together since leaving the creek. He wondered at it, and decided they might have begun to fear pursuit, and were staying near one another. He pushed on harder, hoping the posse was making more time than had Chasteen.

Once George Castleberry pulled in close beside him. Like many men hard of hearing, he talked loudly. "Something funny about these tracks, Dolph. You see the night-crawler tracks in them? Lawton said Chasteen went by

his place about daylight. But these tracks was made a heap sight earlier than that."

A nagging worry began to trouble Dolph. "Chances are Lawton was lying, George. The tracks have to be Chasteen's. We've been following them off and on ever since we left town. Chasteen probably went by the Long L in the middle of the night. Lawton lied so we wouldn't know how much head start Chasteen really had."

There wasn't much doubt in his mind that Lawton was still in sympathy with the outlaws. But maybe Dolph had scared him. He'd waited until he was sure Chasteen could get away. Then he had given the alarm to clear himself.

THE SUN reached its fiery peak and began to slant down toward the west. The long ride had sapped the vitality from the posse's horses, and the men were beginning to sag a little. But in the lead Dolph Noble still sat his saddle straight as a gunbarrel, his gaze always reaching to the skyline ahead. If his horse faltered or slowed, Dolph gently touched him with his spurs and picked him up again. The other riders gradually slowed down until at last they were a long file strung out behind the sheriff.

A hot breeze lifted from the west. As Dolph topped out over a rise and began on the downward slope, his horse lifted its head. The short ears poked forward. The horse slowed to a walk, and, before Dolph could stop him, it nickered.

An answering nicker came on the wind that touched Dolph's face with summer warmth. Dolph's nerves tingled, and he stood up in the stirrups, his eyes eagerly searching the brushy terrain ahead. He held up his hand, and the other possemen rode up to where he'd stopped and reined in beside him.

"Horses ahead yonder," he said. "It's probably Chasteen. Too late for us to slip in there without being seen. Spread out and go into that brush with your guns in your hands. Keep your eyes peeled. We don't want any of us getting shot."

Fanned out in a thin skirmish line, the posse moved into the brush in a slow walk. Tenseness was stretched through the men like a taut spring. Dolph's lips parted, and he became conscious of his own broken, fearful breathing.

He saw them as he broke out into a grassy clearing. At the same time he heard George Castleberry explode:

"Dolph, it's only loose horses."

For a moment he thought these were just strays, that Chasteen had merely passed them and gone on. But then the dread realization began to soak in. It was *these* horses they had been trailing. There was no other answer. There was only one trail leading out of here, a single horse headed on to the west.

Andy Biederman brought up the clincher. His face twisted in range, he came riding up with a tangled mess of ropes on his saddlehorn.

"Look what I found in that brush yonder. We been tricked, Dolph. These horses was haltered and led here on a rope by one man. He turned them loose here and skedaddled on by himself."

Desperation was a drum beating at Dolph's temples. "But we've been trailing the same bunch ever since we left town," he protested futilely. "There's no place they could have switched on us. No place but—the creek!"

It hit him then like a sackful of rocks. It *was* the creek. Chasteen had had a man waiting there with the horses haltered and tied on a rope. Chasteen and his men had ridden into the creek, and the other horses had been led out on the opposite side to continue the trail. Then Chasteen and those with him had ridden down the middle of the creek where they would leave no sign, until they had gotten far enough that Chasteen thought they could safely climb out.

Futile anger fired up in Dolph. It was too late now to do anything about it. There was nothing to do but go back. Maybe, with fresh horses, they could pick up the trail again. But chances were they wouldn't. Chasteen would cover up his trail and lose them somewhere, like he always did.

"Catch up those loose horses," Dolph ordered grimly. "Whoever's got the tiredest horses had better change. We can halter them and bring them on behind us."

While the change was being made, Andy Biederman reined up beside Dolph. "Don't take it so hard, Dolph. It ain't your fault. Chasteen was just too slick. Why, he even took in old George Castleberry."

He frowned then and changed the subject. "Guess you noticed what brand them loose horses was carrying."

Dolph nodded. "A Long L."

Biederman's mustache bristled. "Just something to remember, the first time we get a chance to do anything about it."

STILL four miles from town, they saw riders coming toward them. The sun, almost at the horizon line, splashed a reddish cast across the rolling land and the men who approached them.

The oncoming riders spurred into a lope and didn't rein up until they were almost upon the posse. A length in the lead was a little dried-up man who operated a greasy eating place a little down from Hoggy Truscott's saloon. Many of Hoggy's customers were also his customers.

"From the looks of you, you didn't see anything of Clayton Chasteen," the man said, chips of malice in his voice.

Wariness in him, Dolph shook his head.

The café man grinned without humor. "We didn't think you would. You ain't heard the news yet, have you, Sheriff?"

Dolph's eyes narrowed. "I don't know what news you mean."

A smug triumph rose in the rider's hatchet face. "While you was off chasing shadows, Clayton Chasteen rode in this morning and robbed the bank."

Dolph gripped the saddlehorn and looked at the possemen behind him. His face drained white. A wordless oath escaped from him. He looked down at the ground a long moment.

"Baited," he spoke bleakly. "And we grabbed the hook like a catfish . . ."

Excitement still boiled in the town. Quick to seize an opportunity which might make him look good, Rance Ostrander had taken over the organization and operation of hasty, ill-prepared posses. Now, with darkness drawing down, small parties of searching men were drifting in, discouraged and angry, ready to fasten the blame on anybody who was handy to take it.

Angriest man was Phineas Towbridge, president of the bank.

"It's a lawman's solemn duty to be around to protect the people who pay the taxes and keep him in office," Towbridge stormed at Dolph Noble. "But did you do that? No, you were off on a wild-goose chase heaven knows where, while here at home we were all at the mercy of a vicious band of outlaws!"

Dolph listened in studied patience, his face warm. He couldn't really blame Towbridge.

"We thought we were after Chasteen," Dolph explained evenly. "We were fooled, and I'll take full responsibility for it."

Towbridge's face flared a violent red. "You'll never get a chance to make any more mistakes around here, Noble, if you don't catch Chasteen in a hurry. You'll be out hunting for a job."

John Lane stood by silently, his round face sympathetic but grave as he listened to Towbridge taking out his anger on Dolph. When the banker stalked away, Lane stepped up and put his hand on Dolph's arm.

"Let's go where we can talk a little, Dolph."

In a back office of the bank, John Lane told how Chasteen and four men had suddenly appeared on horseback in front of the building about ten o'clock in the morning and had swept in through the door before anyone had a chance to move.

"They were all masked, but you could tell Chasteen anywhere by his voice and the way he carries himself. Funny thing, Dolph, they didn't take any gold or other coin. They just took paper money. Didn't want to carry the extra weight, I reckon."

Dolph frowned. "Paper money? You got the serial numbers?"

Lane nodded. "Yes, we had them listed on all except a few small bills. First thing we did was to send them out by wire. Every bank in the country will have a list of them before Chasteen has a chance to use the money. Most of what he got was big bills, too. He'd have to take them to a bank to break them." A grim confidence gleamed in Lane's eyes. "He's stuck with them, Dolph. He's got a bagful of money he'll never be able to use."

Dolph still frowned. "But Chasteen's no fool. He's bound to've known that's what would happen."

John Lane cut a sidewise glance at Dolph. "You mean he might've figured a way to get around it?"

Dolph beat his open palm with his right fist. "I don't see how he could. But I'd be willing to bet that he at least thought he did." Then eagerly, he leaned toward Lane. "John, was there—was there any sign of Lila?"

LANE NODDED. "Lila's all right. On his way back to town after he threw you off the trail, Chasteen dropped her off afoot on the Rafter T ranch. It was three miles, but she ran all the way to the house to give the alarm. She was almost dead with exhaustion when she got there. But she was too late. By the time anybody could get in from the ranch, Chasteen had already pulled the robbery and was gone."

Dolph was standing, his heart tripping. "John, where is she?"

"She's over at our house, Dolph. Wife thought we ought to keep her there. People are still pretty mad, and . . . you know how it is."

Dolph turned quickly and started for the door. Lane called him back.

"Dolph, before you go, there's a couple of other things you ought to know."

He pointed his chin toward Towbridge's desk. "There'll be some Rangers here on the morning train. Phineas sent for them. He's lost confidence in you. And one other thing. I'd rather cut my tongue out than to have to tell you. I haven't said a word about it to anybody else.

"I was in here when Chasteen came. I backed up against the wall like everybody else. I saw one of the robbers bend over to pick up a handful of bills, and I caught a glimpse of his face as his handkerchief dropped away from it. Dolph, it was that Herndon boy, the one Tommy has been palling around with ever since they were both in knee pants."

Dolph leaned back against a desk his knees weak beneath him. He could guess what was coming.

"There was another robber I noticed, Dolph. I didn't see his face, and I didn't hear him speak. But he was just about Tommy's size."

John Lane balled his fists. His voice was drawn tight. "I could be wrong. I hope I am. But you know it's been about a week since we've seen Pete Herndon around here. And it's been just about as long since Tommy left."

Dolph closed his eyes, and he let his head ease weakly into his hands. For a long time he sat there, helpless, a knot in his throat. A thousand things ran through his mind at once—old memories of Tommy as a parentless kid running wild and loose because his big brother didn't have the time to take

care of him. A hundred things he should have done and should have said—but hadn't. A wonderful girl named Susan Lane, who wanted Tommy more than anything else in the world and had lost him now because Dolph had driven the boy away.

"If it's true, John," Dolph said tightly, "it's my fault. It's not him that needs to take the punishment. It's me."

Dolph walked down the street like a drunken man, his eyes fastened hazily on the Lane house far ahead, his feet dragging lightly through the sand. He was barely conscious of the people who watched him. He vaguely heard someone call him a name, and it meant nothing to him.

He found himself on the front porch. Susan Lane was standing in the doorway, waiting for him.

"Lila's in here, Dolph," she said quietly.

Dolph stopped and stared at the young girl. "Susan . . ." he began, then broke it off short. He wanted to beg her forgiveness. But she didn't know yet. And he couldn't tell her.

The sight of Lila seated in a rocking chair broke him out of the daze. Her face was drawn, and she was trembling with the emotion she had held pent up within her. He knew that a weaker woman would have broken long before.

"Dolph," she spoke almost in a whisper. She arose shakily and stood there. He took a quick step toward her and bound her tightly in his arms. For a long time they stood that way, drawing strength from one another.

Dolph ached to ask her about Tommy, to find out if he really had been with Chasteen. But he was afraid to. He couldn't ask her, and he knew she wouldn't tell him.

He stepped back for a look at her. His fists tightened as he saw the faint blue color high on her cheek.

"What else did he do to you?" Dolph demanded.

Her stricken eyes were upon his just for a second, then fell. She was trembling. Color rose in her face.

"The law says he's still my husband, Dolph, and I'm still his wife."

Dolph's blood was ice. The fury mounted in him, and blind fury that quickly burned aside all else. There were two scores now.

His voice was like honed steel. "I don't think I could have killed him before, even if I had to. But I'm going to kill him now. I'm going to hunt him out and kill him like a wolf."

WEARINESS settled an almost unbearable weight upon him, but he could not sleep. He lay face down on his cot, fully clothed, staring into the darkness while his mind roiled in torment. Sometime past midnight he managed to drop into fitful sleep. But he was up again, staring across a steaming coffee pot, before the first light of dawn broke in the east.

He walked down to the livery barn and saddled his horse. By daylight he was out alone, trying to pick up sign that would help lead him to Clayton Chasteen. But it was hopeless. Ostrander's irresponsible searching parties had tracked up the area so badly the day before that he couldn't have trailed a whole wagon train. Dolph muttered to himself about Ostrander and reined around toward town again.

The train arrived at nine-thirty. Dolph was back in time to meet it.

The first man who stepped off was a pudgy, middle-aged man with an indoor pallor. The man's eyes fell upon Dolph and dropped to the badge on Dolph's shirt. Dolph thought he caught quick fright in the pale face, but decided he had been wrong. He lost interest in the stranger and turned away from him as the man took a fresh hold on the big leather grip he carried and hurried off.

Another man stepped off the train then and took all Dolph's attention. He was medium tall, with trimmed black mustache, a broad-brimmed hat, and trousers tucked into high-topped

boots. For a second a badge on his vest caught the flash of the sun. He glanced around him briefly. He saw Dolph and walked toward him.

"Sheriff Noble, I believe," he said pleasantly, extending his hand. He had a viselike grip. "I'm Captain Jim Barnhart, Texas Rangers."

"Dolph Noble. You come by yourself, Captain?"

Barnhart jerked a thumb back over his shoulder. "No, there's another man with me, a Ranger recruit. He's back yonder getting our horses from the baggage car."

Worriedly Dolph said, "I hope this won't turn out to be a wild-goose chase for you, Captain Barnhard. I've had plenty of them lately. There's not much to go on."

A shadow of a smile crossed the Ranger's lips. His gaze moved down the street, where the man with the grip was entering Lew Matlock's livery barn.

"Maybe I've brought an ace or two with me, Sheriff. Did you see the man who got off the train just before I did?"

Dolph glanced quickly toward Matlock's. "Why yes, I saw him."

"His name is Danforth. He's a lawyer. And you know what he's got in that grip?"

Dolph shook his head. The Ranger said, "Well, I don't know for sure, but I'd bet a hundred dollars to a Mexicon peso that it's full of greenbacks." The Ranger leaned against the station wall and rolled a cigarette. "You see, he's a dealer in stolen goods. We've known it a long time, but knowing and proving are two different things. He represents a rich old crook in San Antonio. Buys stolen goods at half what they're worth, keeps them till people have stopped looking for them, then sells them at a big profit."

Dolph's heartbeat quickened. "Now I see what you're driving at. He'll go to Clayton Chasteen and buy that stolen bank money from him, giving Chasteen money that he can spend without having to worry."

The Ranger nodded. "That's right. He'll give him about fifty cents on the dollar. He'll lay the money away two or three years till the serial number lists have all been thrown away or forgotten. Then he can bring it out."

Dolph whistled softly. "How'd you get onto him this time?"

"Just luck. We happened to get on the same train with him. I spotted him and asked the conductor where he was bound for. He told me this place, and I put two and two together." The Ranger looked past Dolph. "Here comes the recruit with our horses."

Dolph turned. His jaw sagged, and he clutched a station post. "Tommy!"

TOMMY NOBLE came up in his cocky, bowlegged walk, a grin plastered across his face. There was a high polish on the Ranger badge pinned proudly to his shirt.

"Howdy, Dolph. Hope you're not mad at me any more."

"Mad at you?" Dolph swallowed, his heart thumping happily. A blessed relief flooded over him. "I thought . . . I thought . . . Well, never mind what I thought. When did you join up?"

"Right after I left here. I went straight to Austin. I was assigned to Captain Barnhart's company. Yesterday we got word of the robbery. The captain figured I was the best one to come with him, because I knew the country."

Dolph sat down weakly on the bench in front of the station. He began to laugh. It was a loud, half-crazy laugh, the draining of the dreadful anxiety that had swelled and grown within him until he had thought it would break him apart. The Ranger captain and Tommy watched him wonderingly, until at last the laughter was gone from him, and Dolph was silent again.

Still watching Dolph quizzically, the captain said, "Just to cinch the thing, we ought to go check with the station master and find out if anybody sent

Danforth a wire yesterday. He had to get word of it some way."

The station master pushed up the shade which covered his eyes. "Danforth? Danforth? Seems to me I remember that name. Just a minute."

He riffled through a stack of papers, then pulled one out. "Here it is. I remember now. Brant Lawton came in and sent it. It was about half an hour after the robbery. I know, because I just had got it sent when John Lane got over here with the serial numbers of those bills."

Dolph glanced at the message, then handed it to the captain.

It read: "Have horses ready for your selection. Better bunch than anticipated. Lawton."

The Ranger looked directly at Dolph. He didn't have to speak for his eyes said all there was to say.

The three law men eased down to the sheriff's office and waited inside, watching Lew Matlock's livery through the streaked window. Tommy was silent for a long time, nervously toying with a cartridge in his gunbelt. Presently he spoke.

"Dolph, I hope you're not disappointed about this—about me joining the Rangers, I mean."

Dolph looked at him and smiled a little. "I won't say that I'm in favor of it, Tommy. But I'm through telling you what to do. If this is what you want, I'm not going to stand in your way."

Confidence came into the boy's voice. "Thanks, Dolph. I'm glad you see it like that."

The Ranger captain pointed toward the window. "There he comes. He's got him a buckboard."

Dolph watched while the stranger paid Matlock. The livery man was pointing in a westerly direction. Then the man climbed into the buckboard and headed out in the direction Matlock had shown him.

As soon as Danforth had gotten a safe distance away Dolph rushed down the street to Matlock's, Tommy and Barnhart behind him.

"That man who rented the buckboard, Lew" Dolph said quickly. "Where was he going?"

Matlock pushed back his greasy hat and wiped the sweat from his forehead. "He said he was a horse buyer, and he asked me how to get out to Brant Lawton's place." The old man's eyes fell upon Tommy, and upon Tommy's badge. "Tommy," he exploded with a broad grin. "You, a Ranger? Well now, if that don't beat all. When did you—"

Dolph broke in. "We haven't got time to explain it right now, Lew. Tell you all about it when we get back in."

IN THE CORRAL Dolph flicked a big loop into a milling bunch of horses and hauled out a sorrel he liked to ride.

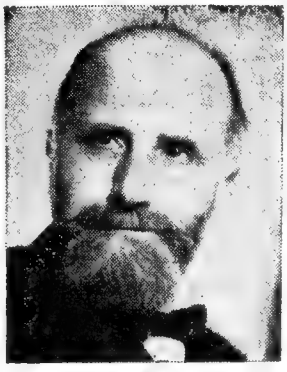
Captain Barnhart watched him seriously. "We're sure liable to need a full posse," he said, "if we get in any kind of tight at all. But we can't afford to take one. It'll be hard enough for just the three of us to follow Danforth to Chasteen's camp without being spotted."

Dolph nodded gravely. "You're right. A full posse couldn't slip up on them. But three of us might. We'll just have to take our chances without any help."

Tommy was studiously rubbing his jaw. "Look," he frowned, "maybe it's not my place to be making suggestions, but it seems to me we *could* have a posse. We could have it give us a long head start, then trail us. It wouldn't be any trouble at all for us to leave a trail old George Castleberry could follow. Why, George can track a cat over bare rock."

Dolph began to grin slowly, remembering what Tommy had said about George Castleberry and Andy Biederman not many days before.

Tommy went on enthusiastically, "We could get George and Andy Biederman and a few more of those



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old boys to trail after us. Then if we got into a jackpot over our heads, we could at least hold the fort till they got there."

A pride began to glow in Dolph. "Tommy, I hate to say it, but it looks like you've got the makings of a lawman."

It didn't take Dolph long to find the men he wanted and quietly spread the word. "You all just slip out in about three hours, one at a time, and meet George where the Long L trail forks off," he told Andy. "Be prepared to stay out a couple of days. We're bringing in Chasteen's bunch this time, or Twin Wells is fixing to get a new sheriff."

There was no real need in trailing Danforth to the Long L, Dolph knew. He was bound to go there anyway. The important thing was to watch where he went after the Long L.

Under a furnace-like sun, the sheriff and the two Rangers rode south of the wagon trail that Danforth followed to Lawton's ranch. There was always the possibility that Lawton might send somebody back to be sure Danforth wasn't being trailed. The three men rode in silence across the brushy flatland and into the broken, brush-studded hills east of the Long L. They stayed within protection of the brush as much as they could, their eyes warily scanning the terrain around them.

A tall, rocky hill topped by scrub cedar gave a good view of the Lawton headquarters. The three riders climbed to the top of it. Dolph reached into his saddlebags and took out an old folding spyglasss that he had bought somewhere a long time ago. The captain looked at it and grinned.

"Pity I didn't think of that."

Dolph settled on his belly on the sunbaked ground and trained the spyglass upon the ranch headquarters. He could see Danforth's rented buckboard standing near the main building. Out in a corral someone was saddling a horse. Dolph blinked his eye and rubbed it, trying to see a little better. When the man finally mounted and rode out the open gate, Dolph recognized Brant Lawton by the way he sat his saddle.

Lawton pointed east, along the wagon road to town, and said something to one of his men standing nearby. Then he pulled the horse around and headed southeast in an easy trot. Danforth followed him in the buckboard.

The cowhand to whom Lawton had spoken rode eastward. Checking to be sure no one had been trailing Danforth, Dolph knew.

Dolph watched until he knew for certain the course Danforth and Lawton were taking. Then he stiffly climbed to his feet and headed back for his horse.

"We'll skirt along the south side of this range of hills," he said. "They'll be going out through a gap down yonder. We can trail them on from there." He indicated with a wave of his hand.

They were safely hidden in a long, brushy draw when the buckboard and the horseman emerged through the gap five hundred yards away.

DOLPH'S biggest fear was that Lawton's horse or the buckboard team might scent the lawmen's horses and nicker. But luckily the wind was out of the west. As long as it remained that way, there was little chance the other horses would catch their scent.

All my life I've cussed the west wind because it never did anything but blow the rain away," Dolph commented. "But this time I hope it holds up."

The terrain ahead of them became rockier and rougher as they worked along. Worriedly Dolph paused and looked back at the shallow tracks the horses were leaving, when they left any tracks at all.

"George would have to be part Indian to follow us if this gets much worse."

Tommy said confidently. "Don't you worry. George'll make it."

Occasionally, when the ground got too hard, Dolph would purposefully have Tommy ride around the long way, seeking out softer ground which would leave a good track. They broke down branches of bushes and laid them on the ground to point their course.

Only once in a while did they actually have to pick up the tracks of the buckboard. Most of the time when he was in doubt that they were heading in the right direction, Dolph could climb up on a point afoot and search out the two men with his spyglass.

Even rougher country lay ahead. Dolph wondered how the buckboard would ever make it. But Brant Lawton seemed to know where to find the easiest going. Sometimes he had to skirt far around a line of hills or through a water-carved canyon. But he always unerringly found the way.

Once the buckboard got jammed up in a pile of rocks. Through the glass Dolph watched Lawton tie on with a rope and with this horse help the buckboard team pull out.

Tommy was puzzled. "Why the dickens did they bring along a buckboard, anyway? Easiest thing for them to do would've been to take a pack horse and ride."

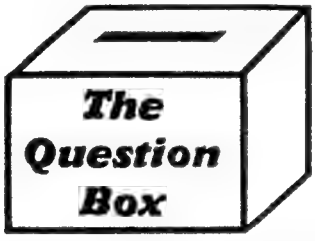
Captain Barnhart grinned. "Didn't you see the soft padding in the seat of that lawyer's pants? That's why they didn't take horses. I'll bet he's even got him a pillow in the buckboard seat."

With the sun sinking low, the lawmen found themselves in a broken country where tall *sotol* stalks stood starkly against the ragged skyline like a thousand Comanche lances, and the thick-trunked dagger plants in the distance took on the grim look of waiting men. There were a hundred places where a man, a horse, even a wagon could drop out of sight and remain hidden from searching eyes.

A prescient tingle began working up the back of Dolph's neck. He glanced at the two men flanking him and saw in their tense faces that they felt it too. They would see no more than they had seen all day. Yet somehow they knew they didn't have much farther to go. It was in the vague tension that lay over the silent land like the shimmering heat waves that were fading with the setting sun.

"Can't be much further," grunted Captain Barnhart. "They haven't got any camp gear in that buckboard. So they're expecting to get where they're going by dark."

Dusk settled quickly after the sun



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disappeared behind the hills.

Tommy's horse struck a stone with a hind foot and sent it clattering down a slope. Dolph whirled in the saddle, needles driving into him.

"Easy. Take it easy. Sound carries a far piece at this time of day."

He drew up and listened. Straining, he could hear the grating of the iron buckboard rims on rock far ahead. He looked at the captain. The Ranger nodded and they moved on. But they were moving more slowly now, stopping every few hundred yards to listen. Each time they could still hear the rattle of the tires.

THEN THERE CAME a time when they couldn't. Darkness had dropped down upon them. The moon rising yonder was only a dull sliver that would provide little light.

Dolph eased forward to listen, leaving his horse behind. He came back shaking his head. "Tommy," he whispered, "you go listen. You ought to have better ears than either one of us."

In a moment Tommy was back. Excitement tingled in his voice. "I don't hear anything. I'd bet they got to where they were going."

Captain Barnhart said, "Then we'd better go on afoot. We can lead the horses. Less noise that way."

They started on afoot. Dolph became conscious of a faint tinkling of his spurs. He stopped long enough to shove a twig into the shank of each spur, to bind the rowel. Tommy watched him and did the same. Captain Barnhart had taken off his spurs when he had dismounted, and had hung them over the saddlehorn.

The lawmen worked ahead slowly, carefully testing each forward step for treacherous rocks that might roll and slide and send their sudden clatter hammering through the night. Every so often there was a quick strike of boot or hoof against rock, and rock against rock. Dolph's hands broke with cold sweat.

"No use," he said softly. "We've got to leave these horses behind. They'll give us away."

They tied their mounts at the foot

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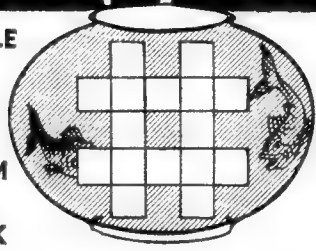

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of a thorny hill. Dolph looked overhead at the stars which stood out like brilliant diamonds against a pitch-black sky. He picked out the Big Dipper and the North Star, and thought he could find this spot again in the darkness. Then he moved on, Tommy and the Ranger beside him.

A quarter-hour later they painstakingly worked up the stony side of a hill and squatted at the top to look down upon the other side. Dolph's hands burned from sudden biting contact with a thorny bush of some kind.

Below him he saw the reddish glow of a small campfire, apparently built in a hole to keep from showing any more than it had to. The outlaws had picked out a small hollow between hills for their camp. A searching party would have had one chance in a hundred of lucking onto it. Fact of the matter, Dolph was sure one or two must have passed plenty close.

"Three men, maybe four, by that campfire," Captain Barnhart muttered, hunkered low beside Dolph. "The rest are probably close by. It's just too dark to see them."

The buckboard showed dimly when an occasional flame licked upward above the top of the hole. The team had been unhitched.

"We going to jump them now?" Tommy breathed in excitement.

"No," whispered the captain. "No use having that bunch on our hands all night. We'll wait till just before daylight. They'll all be asleep. We can slip in and take them then before they know what's up. Till then, we'd just as well flop down here and get us some rest."

Weariness had worn through every fiber of Dolph's body. He stretched out on the rock ground. In a few minutes he was asleep.

HE AWOKE to the gentle pressure of a hand on his shoulder.

"Sun-up pretty soon, Dolph," Tommy whispered in his ear. He glanced around and saw the captain sitting up in the near darkness.

Dolph managed to shake loose the ragged edges of sleep. He glanced at the east and saw color amid the fading stars.

Tommy's eyes were pinched, and his face was drawn. "Didn't you sleep at all?" Dolph queried anxiously.

Tommy shook his head grimly. "No; and I don't see how you all could do it, either, knowing what's coming up."

Dolph glanced at Captain Barnhart and caught a touch of a grin hovering around his trimmed mustache. Dolph's face twisted to the sour taste in his mouth. He pointed with his chin to the bottom of the hill.

"Coffee pot's down there," he said. "Let's go get it."

Tommy touched his arm and pointed back to the left. "I got their horses spotted. They're right down yonder, just around the edge of this hill. They got them on a picket line, like cavalry."

Dolph frowned. "See anybody watching them?"

Tommy shook his head. "No. There might be somebody, but I couldn't see anyone in the dark."

Stealthily they began to work their way down the hill, guns in their hands. Dolph took his time, testing every footing before he put his weight down. The fire had died out, and there was no light from it. The moon had paled leaving only the barest of illumination from the coming dawn to show the men their way.

An old dread began to tighten in Dolph, a dread of the gun he gripped in his sweaty hand. In his mind roared the deadly gunfire of another day. He tried desperately to shut his mind to the awful memory of a wild kid who had died in pain and terror. But the picture was there to stay, burned deep as the stamp of a hot branding iron. He found himself trembling, and not from fear. He glanced at Tommy and wished the boy was not here. This was the thing from which Dolph had tried so hard to shield him.

Then they were at the bottom of the hill. Dolph paused to catch a deep breath and give his thumping heart a chance to settle. He counted the still figures scattered on blankets on the ground. He held up seven fingers for the captain to see. Chasteen and four men had held up the bank. Lawton and Danforth made it seven.

Captain Barnhart nodded in satis-

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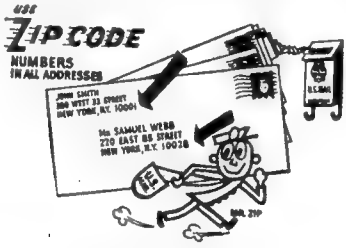

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faction. He pointed the muzzle of his gun straight up in the air and squeezed the trigger.

In the instant the shot exploded and sent its sharp echoes rocketing out among the hills, the outlaws started flinging their blankets aside. In the same instant Barnhart's voice bawled with the thunder of a cannon:

"Hands up! Don't any man move!"

Caught by surprise, the outlaws stared, sleepy-eyed, their mouths open in shock. Their muddled minds hadn't fully grasped the situation.

"Now get up," Dolph ordered. "Get over here together, all of you."

Clayton Chasteen stood still and silent, his heavy face sullen. There once had been a careless charm about him, an easy-going attitude that long since had dropped away. A burning intensity had gradually taken its place, an intensity born of a growing greed and an ever-increasing callousness.

Now a three-day growth of beard bristled on his face. His clothes were crumpled from sleeping in them. His eyes dwelt heavily on Dolph, eyes that glowed in hatred.

Dolph's hand tightened on his gun. Hatred burned in him. He felt a momentary compulsion to pull the trigger, to blow Chasteen apart—for Lila's sake, he told himself. For Lila's sake.

But he eased the pressure on the trigger and felt a shudder work through him. No, he couldn't do it. He had sworn to, but now he had the chance, and he couldn't bring himself to do it.

Chasteen's eyes bored at him. "You ought've pulled that trigger, Dolph. Some day you'll wish you had."

Dolph swallowed bitterly. "Go see about those horses, Tommy," he said.

Tommy turned. A second later Dolph heard him shout, "Dolph, look out!"

DOLPH whirled, and a rock slipped under his foot. As he fell, he caught a glimpse of a figure in the darkness swinging a gun toward him. Another gun boomed—Tommy's—and the man slumped, his pistol hitting the rocky ground with a clatter.

A ragged groan tore from his throat, and the fallen outlaw cried in agony,

"Tommy, Tommy!"

Dolph stiffened at the voice. He heard something like a whimper burst from Tommy. The boy flung his gun aside and went running, tripping, getting up to run again, until he had fallen to his knees beside the man on the ground.

"Pete," Tommy cried. *"Pete!"*

He looked at Dolph then, his chin quivering, his voice starting to break. "Dolph," he sobbed, "I've killed Pete. He was my friend, and I've killed him."

Dolph's throat swelled. An emptiness ached in him. Gently he placed his hand on his kid brother's shoulder. But he knew that right now he couldn't touch the boy. For this, there was no sympathy deep enough. Dolph knew. He'd been there.

Tommy's thin shoulders heaved as he knelt over the silent body of the boy who had played with him, walked with him, ridden with him since the days of their boyhood. After a long while Tommy looked up, his eyes blurred. "Dolph," he begged, "what'll I ever do?"

Dolph's eyes hardened, and his gaze set atop the stony hill, where cactus stalks stood stately and tall against the swelling light of dawn.

"You'll just have to learn to live with it," he said, "like I did."

With gentleness he pulled the boy up to a stand. "You better go pick up your gun, Tommy, and get those horses like you started to."

Tommy looked toward the gun, and a shudder passed through his body. "I don't want it, Dolph. I don't ever want to touch a gun again."

His voice was like steel.

But Dolph's voice was hard, too. "You've got to, Tommy. We've gone too deep to stop now. Go get your gun."

Shoulders slumped, Tommy walked like a drunken man. He knelt and picked up the gun. He held it a moment as if it were a snake, then dropped it into his holster. He turned mechanically and walked out toward the picket line.

Dolph knew he should be helping Barnhart watch the Chasteen bunch. But he couldn't tear his eyes from the tragic figure of his brother.

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He heard the shot and whirled just as Captain Barnhart grabbed at his shoulder and sank to his knees. In a flash Dolph picked the outlaw who had done the shooting and fired at him. The men suddenly were scattering like quail. And Dolph realized with a sagging heart that some of them certainly had managed to grab up guns as they fled in the confusion. Dolph fired into the fleeing men and heard one yelp in pain. He saw the pudgy Danforth make a grab for his big leather grip. Dolph directed a bullet at him, and the lawyer lit out with empty hands.

"Tommy," Dolph yelled, "get hold of those horses, quick. We can't let Chasteen's bunch get mounted!"

But Tommy was too slow. Dolph's heart sank as he heard the sudden clatter of frightened hoofs. Someone had cut the picket line.

He dropped to his knees beside Barnhart. The Ranger's teeth were gritted in pain. His leathery face had drained from shock. A steady trickle of blood sopped his shirt beneath a bluish wound high in his left shoulder.

"We've got to get out of this hole," Dolph said quickly. "If they get above us and go to shooting, we're done."

He didn't know what made him think of the money then. He knew with a dead certainty that Chasteen wouldn't go far without the money. Dolph grabbed up the lawyer's leather grip, and spotted two bulging pairs of saddlebags. These he flung over his wide shoulder. Then he helped the wounded Ranger to his feet and supported him as they moved on toward Tommy.

Pride was stiff in Captain Barnhart. "Damn it, do you think I never got shot at before? I can make it."

Tommy grabbed hold and helped Dolph take Barnhart up the hill. The boy's face was set, his eyes empty.

ON TOP of the hill Dolph paused to look around him in quick desperation. A bullet searched for him from below. On another side he caught a quick flash of a blue shirt. The outlaws were moving to sorround them. For a moment Dolph considered trying to get to the horses they had left tied the night

before, but he knew they couldn't make it with the wounded Barnhart.

Another bullet searched for him, and a third. He realized grimly that they were trapped here atop this hill.

But it was a good place to make a stand, if it came to that. The hilltop was not large, and a rain-cut watercourse on its crest was deep enough to give protection against enemy guns.

Barnhart's eyes were glazed in pain. "They got away with their horses, didn't they?" he asked weakly as Dolph tore a hole in his shirt. Dolph nodded. The Ranger said, "Then we've lost them."

Dolph shook his head. "I don't think so. We've got the money. They're not apt to leave here without it. We'll just have to hold out till George Castleberry and his bunch get here."

Barnhart's face was a deathly white. "And if Castleberry doesn't find us?"

"He's got to!" Dolph's fists doubled . . .

Sunrise came, and the sun started its steady climb above the dry, thorny hills. With the expanding heat of a growing new day, Dolph began to realize that he had overlooked one vital point in his haste. That was water.

They could get along without food, for a while. But they couldn't do long without water, especially the wounded Ranger who lay under the lacy shade of a stunted bush, the fever rising in him.

They had left their canteens tied to their saddles, and Dolph knew there was no chance ever of reaching them. But no doubt there was water in the outlaw camp.

His eyes dwelt a long time upon the two men with him—the old, experienced Ranger who lay wounded and helpless, and the young, green kid who had been wounded just as badly in his own way, and who was also near helplessness as he fought a grim, fruitless battle within himself.

Grimly Dolph studied the bags of money. What if he tried to reach the outlaw camp for water, and Chasteen climbed the hill while he was gone? Barnhart couldn't fight. And Dolph felt a strong conviction that Tommy no longer had the will to do it.

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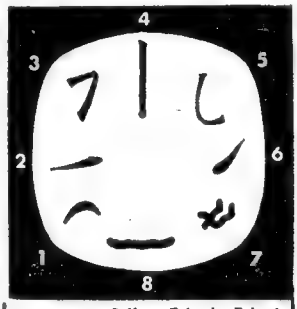

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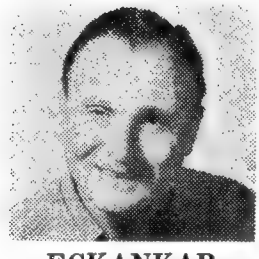

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But there was little choice between the money and Barnhart's desperate need of water. Dolph quietly told Tommy where he was going. The boy heard, but he made no sign. He maintained a glassy stare at nothing, far off in the distance. Worriedly Dolph went on and left him.

It wasn't far down to Chasteen's camp, as distance goes. But it was a long way for a wary man moving in a low crouch, scuttling from protection of one bush to another. In a few minutes Dolph made it. His gaze fell upon a pair of canteens hanging from the buckboard. He eased over and pulled the first one off. It was full. A glad grin touched his face, and he reached for the other.

A bullet whined by his face and richocheted off the rocky hillside. Dolph jerked backward, leaving the second canteen. He fired once over his shoulder at the unseen gunman and struck out in a run. He felt a bullet rip into the canteen, almost tearing it loose from his grasp. His heart sickened as the water spouted out in a finger-thick stream.

Dolph finally gained the top of the hill, the gunman still firing intermittently at him. He knelt beside Barnhart, his heart hammering from the hard, fast climb. He wiped the sweat from his face onto his sleeve. Then he tilted the punctured canteen to the captain's lips. His heart sank. There was hardly a good swallow left in it for the wounded man.

It seemed forever before the sun reached the midpoint and began to slope downward again.

The heat was thick, and a swimming heat haze blurred the distant hills. Hunger gnawed at Dolph's stomach, and thirst swelled his tongue.

Captain Barnhart had passed into a dreamy subconsciousness. In town, with a doctor to take care of it immediately, his wound might not have kept Barnhart out of the saddle long. But out here in the sun, without care, without water, it was something else. There was a big chance now that Barnhart would never get off this hill.

Tommy had gotten hold of himself somehow. The haunted hollowness was still in his eyes, but he was doing what

little had to be done, and most of it on his own initiative.

Yet, when Dolph told him to check his gun, Tommy shrank away from it.

IT WAS some time early in the afternoon that Clayton Chasteen came forth with his proposition. He came a-horseback, reining in at the foot of the hill. His hand was up in the sign of peace.

"Listen, Dolph," Chasteen called, "it looks like we got a trade to make. You need water, and we want that money. Now we got plenty of water. We'll let you have it if you'll give us those bags."

Dolph thought for a long time before he gave his answer. He saw the quick anger strike Chasteen. Then the outlaw shrugged. "It's your choice, Dolph. You're never getting down off that hill as long as you've got that money."

Dolph watched him pull the horse around and ride away. He licked his cracked lips and realized how desperately dry he was.

George, he murmured, *where are you?*

It was watching the captain that did it. Dolph finally could stand it no more. It was one thing for a lawman to die a quick death in the line of duty. He might expect that at any time. It was quite another for him to lie in prolonged agony just for two pairs of saddlebags and a leather grip full of greenbacks.

Resignedly Dolph got to his feet. He picked up the saddlebags and flung them across his shoulder. He took hold of the leather grip.

Tommy was watching him woodenly. "You think they'll really make a trade?"

Dolph shrugged. "Can't tell. But we've got to take the chance." He glanced at the boy's gun, lying on the ground. "Better pick it up, Tommy. You're going to have to cover me, in case there's a trick."

Tommy picked it up again, his face twisted in loathing. "Dolph," he grated, "if it comes to shooting . . . I'm afraid I can't."

Dolph's mouth was hard. "You'll have to!"

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He worked his way down the hillside, the heat of the sun-baked rocks blistering through the soles of his boots. He paused at the bottom, where the horses had been picketed, and looked across at Clayton Chasteen and his men. They stood silently in a rough line, watching him. Dolph waited only a moment, then walked toward them. He watched only Chasteen as he narrowed the distance between them. The black stubble of beard on Chasteen's face was caked with dirt and the sweat that had trickled through it. His eyes were reddened wickedly by the heat of sun and wind, and the constant irritation of dust. His shirt was starched in dirty wrinkles from his sweat.

Grudgingly Dolph cast down the saddlebags and the grip by the outlaw's brush-scarred boots. He glanced around him and saw two canteens. Ignoring Chasteen, he stepped to them and picked them up. Eagerly he uncapped one and tilted it to his parched lips. The water was lukewarm from lying in the sun, but it was wonderfully wet.

Dolph lowered the canteen, recapped it, and started to walk back toward the hill. Chasteen stepped in front of him, gun in his hand. Two other outlaws flanked Chasteen, their hands resting near their holsters.

"What's the idea, Clayton?" Dolph demanded, alarm beginning to grip him.

Chasteen's eyes were heavy and gleamed with hatred. "You don't really think we could let you go, do you, Dolph? We got our money again. You think we'd let you out to bring a posse in here and trap us before we could get out?"

Cold fear tightened in the pit of Dolph's stomach. He let the canteens ease to the ground. His hand passed near the gun on his hip, but he knew better than to try to reach for it.

Tommy! he thought desperately.

"You made a deal, Clayton," he pointed out, his voice even, "Haven't you got any honor left at all?"

Then the real hatred began to worm into Chasteen's dirty face. His eyes narrowed briefly, and the corners of his mouth pulled down. "Honor?

You're talking to me about honor, you night-crawling, wife-stealing . . ."

The hand with the gun lashed out. Dolph swayed back, pain exploding where the gun had struck him high on the cheek bone. An instant flash of fury made him drop his hand. But he caught it and raised it again. There was ice in his stomach, and death looked at him from the hate-filled eyes of Clayton Chasteen, and from the awesome bore of Chasteen's gun.

CLAYTON," Dolph said quickly, hoping for time, "I didn't steal Lila from you—you drove her away. You made her so miserable she couldn't stand to be around you any more. After that you had no right to her."

Chasteen's voice was like the cracking of a whip. "She's still my wife. Nobody takes anything that belongs to me."

Chasteen's hand tightened convulsively on the gun. Then he relaxed it momentarily, a twisted grin crossing his stubbled face. "I taught her that the other night. Now I'm fixing to teach you, Dolph Noble."

Dolph's heart bobbed up as Chasteen's gun suddenly steadied.

The slap of a .45 echoed across the hills and bounded back like a clap of thunder. Chasteen buckled, his eyes sightless before he crumpled in a heap on the rocky ground.

Dolph glanced at him only a split second, long enough to know he was hit. Then he jerked his own gun and put a bullet through the outlaw at Chasteen's left before the man could free his holster. With one quick step forward, Dolph swung the gunbarrel upward and down across the temple of the other man. He whirled to face the rest of the outlaws. The sudden, sharp turn of events had caught them up in panic. Only one man had drawn his gun. Dolph leveled a shot at him and saw the outlaw drop like a sack of grain.

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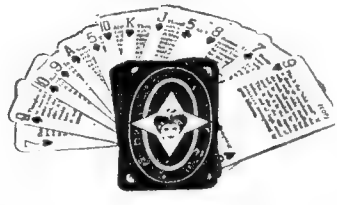

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They stood wide-eyed, staring into the smoking muzzle of Dolph's gun, and wincing against the biting smell of gunpowder that drifted among them and lifted lazily upward into the brassy sky.

Tommy Noble eased down the hillside to stand by Dolph. His young face was drained white. He looked at Chasteen, then quickly turned away. Dolph thought the boy was going to be sick. But Tommy got hold of himself.

"That was a real shot, Tommy," Dolph said quietly. "I don't think I could ever have done it at that distance."

Tommy's voice wavered. "I wedged the gun between two rocks. It had to hit him." Desperately he added, "But I didn't really want to kill him, Dolph, I *had* to, that's all."

Dolph nodded, his voice just above a whisper. "I know, Tommy. That's how it is when you're a lawman. Sometimes you've got to do things you'd never do if the choice was your own."

Tommy pondered that for a long time, his face knitted. Then, without a word, he took the Ranger badge off his shirt and dropped it on the ground.

Most desperate of the captured men was the lawyer Danforth.

"Sheriff," he pleaded in a wild, cracking voice, "this is all a terrible mistake. I don't belong here. I was kidnapped, dragged here. "Look," he begged, his hands shaking, "there are thousands of dollars in that grip. They're yours, if you'll just give me a horse and let me get out of here."

Brant Lawton's face twisted in disgust. "Shut up," he roared at the quavering lawyer. "You took your chances like the rest of us, and you lost. Now you'll at least stand up to it like a man."

But Danforth couldn't. He collapsed to his knees and sat there in helpless desperation, his plump body trembling.

Less than half an hour later George Castleberry came riding up with Andy Biederman and nearly a dozen men. His old eyes took in the whole story in a three-second sweep of the hill.

"Got so it was easier to trail a hawk's shadow across a lake of water than it

was to keep up with you," he said. "It was the shots that brought us on in. How bad hurt's the Ranger?"

"Bad enough," Dolph said. "But I think he'll make it now. We'll have to haul him in on the buckboard."

They buried the dead beneath a tall mound of rocks. Then the surviving outlaws were put on horseback. Danforth raised some cain about it, but it did him no good. All the way across the rough country and back to town, he rode in the rear, just in front of the last posseman, bouncing miserably in the saddle.

Tommy Noble, when the posse arrived, walked off a little way by himself. He pulled the gun out of his holster and hurled it as far as he could across the rocky ground.

A bleak misery in him, Dolph Noble stood on the railroad station platform and looked far down the track to where it curved back behind the distant hill. He could see the gray smoke begin to rise there.

He turned back to Lila Chasteen, who sat stiffly on a platform bench. Her black formal traveling dress looked hot and uncomfortable, but good manners took little heed of a woman's comfort.

"I'm going to miss you, Lila," he said.

She smiled at him, a quick smile that failed to cover up the sadness misting her dark blue eyes. "Maybe not too much, Dolph. You won't have time, what with the preparations for Tommy's and Susan's wedding. I'm going to hate to miss it. It will be the biggest Twin Wells ever had." Then, in all seriousness, she asked, "What were you and John Lane arguing about? Whatever it was, he walked away awfully disappointed."

Frowning, Dolph studied the splintered planks of the platform. "He was wanting me to hurry up and file for sheriff again. The deadline is today."

Her eyes looked levelly at him. "And you told him no?"

"I told him I'd had the office long enough. I told him that after all that's happened, I owed it to you, and to myself, to turn the job over to somebody else."

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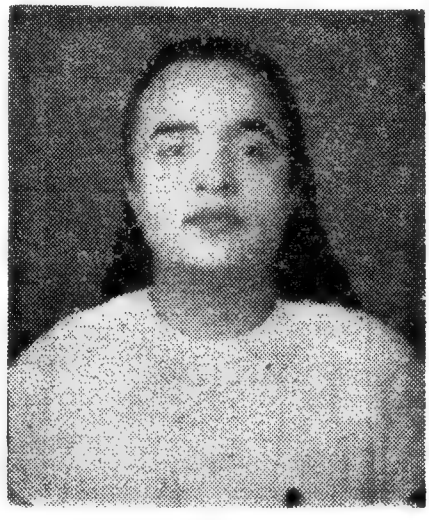

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She said pointedly, "But there is no one else, is there? No one but Rance Ostrander."

Dolph's fist tightened. "You're right. He's the only one who's filed."

"Dolph," she said evenly, "you know he has to be beaten. A sheriff like him could ruin this town. You could beat him, easily." Her voice lowered. "You've been a lawman so long now, Dolph, that you'll never really be anything else the rest of your life, no matter how hard you try. So why don't you admit it to yourself?"

Dolph touched her arm. He told himself that he hadn't really wanted to run for office again, that he had wanted to quit. Yet somehow the words brought him relief.

"You're asking me to file?"

She nodded. "Yes, Dolph."

The train roared into the little station and stopped for its brief moment to load and unload mail and passengers. His big hand still gripping Lila's slender arm, and his heart beginning to beat faster, he watched her trunk being unloaded onto the baggage car.

Desperately Dolph tried to frame the words he wanted to say. "Lila," he managed finally, "when you think enough time's passed to be right and proper, you can send me word. I'll be there on the first train, if you still want me."

She turned to him and melted against him, her warm cheek flat against his broad chest. "I'll want you, Dolph."

Dolph stood alone on the station platform and watched until the train was only a speck on the horizon, its trail of smoke disappearing into the summer sky. A few months—that would be so long.

At last he looked back over his shoulder toward the lowering sun. The day would soon be over. If he was going to file, he'd better do it soon.

He looked down at the silver star on his shirt. He polished it with his sleeve, an eager smile beginning to flicker on his face. If it was a campaign they wanted, he'd give them one. He turned then, and headed back toward the sheriff's office in a quick, sure stride.

OUR AIR MAIL

(Continued from page 9)

sports, music, horses, traveling and reading, especially R.R., so I hope many of you other readers will fill up my mailbox. All letters will be answered, regardless of age, sex, or creed — so write soon, people.

MAUREEN ROSE

Box 751
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Alberta, Canada

Scotch Sailor

Dear Editor:

I am a very keen reader of RR and any magazines or books I can find connected with the West. Rodeo interests me much, and I would welcome any letters from cowhands or cowgirls who take part in rodeo events in America. Am on a general cargo tramping charter and we do not know where we are going after China, but the below address will always find me eventually, and whoever writes me I promise to answer in person. So come on, all you ranch hands, male and female, and show a Scotsman some of that warm American hospitality.

George True

226 High Street,
Portobello, Edinburgh, 15
Scotland

Fillpino Friend

Dear Editor:

Your wonderful magazine has given me the pleasure of wishing you would place me one among those in Our Air Mail column. I am a Filipino and in my sweet summer. I love reading good books and letter writing, as well as any kind of sports. I always enjoy penning people around the world and promise to answer all letters if possible.

JESSE T. ANDRADA

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Second Time Around

Dear Editor:

Met some awfully nice people through your column several years ago and would love to have another chance. Am now 38, divorced, 5'4" tall, weigh 112 and have brown hair and eyes. Love traveling, photography, gardening, bowling, music, swimming, horseback riding and sometimes a night on the town, though I'm a homebody at heart. Would love to hear from everyone, male or female—especially servicemen who would like mail from home. Will answer all and exchange photos with everyone who wishes.

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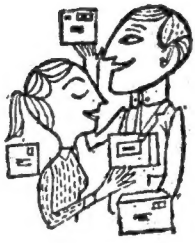

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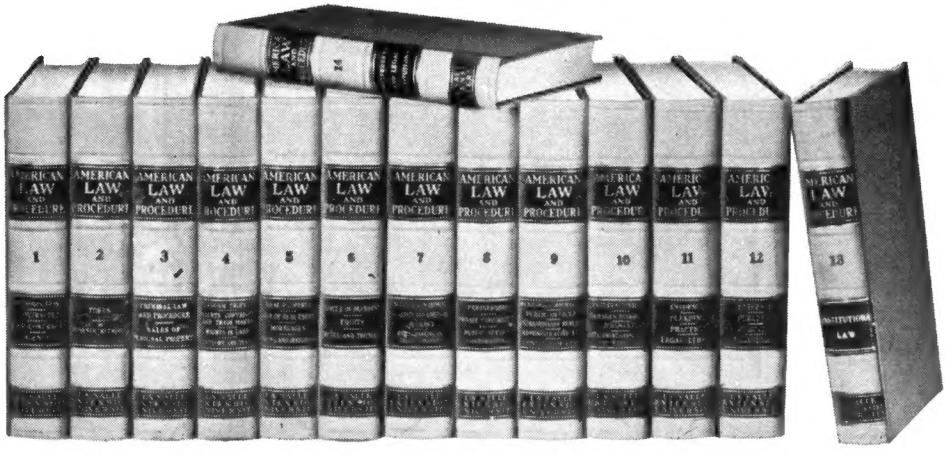

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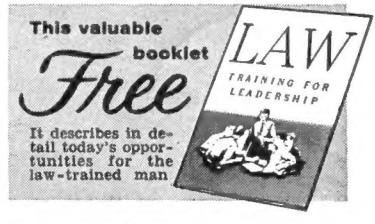

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